



# PLAN PRAC

Miss Hall's School in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, is surrounded by woods, and bears pose a more realistic threat than people under usual circumstances.

# Developing a strong incident response team has helped Miss Hall's School handle unexpected challenges, including the ongoing pandemic.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

- Different from a safety committee, an incident response team involves staff from several departments to respond to a range of emergencies.
- Establishing a regular meeting schedule and avoiding frequent turnover of team members will build rapport that becomes important when responding to an emergency.
- An egalitarian philosophy and nimbleness make for a high-functioning team. Transparency and frequent communications with the school community build trust.



By Amber Stockham

A couple years ago, Miss Hall's School in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, began planning a student trip to Haiti for the spring of 2019. The school-organized trip aimed to provide the students with a geographical, sociological and historical education while they participated in a volunteer program with local children, whose families continued to struggle following the disastrous earthquake in 2010.

When Haiti experienced civil unrest in the summer of 2018, the school's 14-member incident response team (IRT) convened to assess the situation. Initially, the IRT decided to allow the trip to proceed but committed to monitoring the situation. Together with the school's trip committee, the team developed a trip manual for the lead chaperone which addressed possible emergency situations.

Through the remainder of the year, the IRT followed reports on the regions of Haiti where student travel was planned and, ultimately, State Department travel warnings. When the civil unrest gave way to violence and reports indicated volatility would continue through the winter, the IRT did decide to cancel the trip. But the incident would not be fully resolved for months. Details, including communications to students and families, refunds, and trip insurance for international students who had not planned to return home on break, had to be worked out. The trip was rescheduled for this spring, only to be cancelled due to the pandemic.

While most schools have a safety committee, and many convene their leadership to address concerns, incident response teams — also called school emergency response teams or emergency management teams — have not always been commonplace in independent schools. In an era of increased uncertainty and concern for school communities, an IRT can provide stability and continuity of operations, engendering trust in the community and assuring institutional knowledge and continual improvement in responses.



## Miss Hall's School's Pandemic Response

Head of School Julia Heaton is proud of the school's work to prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The incident response team began addressing concerns in mid-January, as the school planned for the school's first long winter weekend. MHS students come from around the world, and some were headed home to China and neighboring countries for the lunar new year, so the team tracked the virus's progress in East Asia early on. In January, the IRT was concerned about travel restrictions for students.

By February, it was apparent that the school needed to plan for potential exposures on campus. The IRT developed protocols for isolating exposed individuals and tracking exposures. The team began communicating regularly with local authorities to keep abreast of new information.

Like many schools, MHS went into spring break uncertain of the future. The IRT communicated it would decide about the remainder of the spring semester by the end of March, and approximately 40 students remained in campus dorms for spring break due to travel concerns. On March 23, the IRT recommended closing the campus for the remainder of the year, and the board of trustees' incident advisory committee accepted that recommendation.

The operations team develop protocols for safe operations on the mostly empty campus, which were approved by the IRT. The IRT continues to meet regularly to discuss the ongoing pandemic and to adjust strategies as new information comes to light.

When asked what MHS might have done differently, Heaton said she would have assembled a master list of who was on campus each day earlier. With so much activity, tracking people on campus became challenging. But Heaton is glad the IRT has not rushed to make decisions before seeking guidance from experts. She recommends all schools "communicate what you know and be prepared to pivot."

The IRT's regular and frequent meetings throughout the pandemic and clear communications to the community have led to a positive response from both families and employees, said Heaton. Prioritizing student well-being and safety has required the school to remain vigilant and adopt new practices at a rapid pace.

For NBOA's COVID-19 Resources see [nboa.org/covid](http://nboa.org/covid).

## ASSEMBLING THE TEAM

For Miss Hall's School (MHS), an all-girls, grades 9–12 boarding-day school, the IRT has paid dividends, not only in handling the recent Haiti trip but also countless other unexpected incidents. Led by Robert Aldrich, director of campus services and a former police chief with 13 years in independent school security, the team includes the school's head and deans, as well as directors in advancement and communications, admissions, finance, facilities and safety, technology, health services and residential life. With representatives from each department on campus, the IRT can develop a complete picture of any concern quickly and disperse information and instructions efficiently to the appropriate personnel.

An IRT should be small enough to remain nimble but big enough to allow team members to work in shifts when managing an incident that cannot be quickly resolved, said Aldrich. Members ideally represent all departments that might need to respond, from security to public relations. Team members who can serve dual purposes or who have experience in emergency response can be especially valuable. MHS's director of communications, for example, is also a volunteer firefighter. Team members should be respected by the community and should effectively represent the people who are being asked to trust the IRT's decisions.

Maintaining consistent team membership — and avoiding turnover — helps members develop a shared understanding of the community's needs and a consistent approach to incidents, said Aldrich. And when new members join the team, acclimate them to not just their responsibilities, but also team culture. Ideally, each team member should have a back-up who can train with the team and replace the primary member if they become unavailable.

## PREPARING TO RESPOND

Miss Hall's IRT meets every four to six weeks to share information and train, and it assembles as needed when an incident occurs or a concern arises. The IRT's regular meeting schedule helps build a rhythm and rapport among the group. During the pandemic, that means



Head of School Julia Heaton (center) with students.

three regularly scheduled meetings each week. With students both on campus and engaged in distance learning from their homes, there is much to consider. The high number of international and domestic boarding students living in dorms make social distancing difficult, and the scenarios to consider for the upcoming school year are everchanging.

The team regularly plans drills and exercises for the entire community as well as specific departments. They review incidents from other schools, asking what they can learn from those incidents, how to avoid them, and how MHS might respond in a similar situation. The team also integrates small-scale tabletop exercises into their regular meetings.

Each summer, the IRT gathers for a retreat, where team members run several full-scale tabletop exercises. These tabletops address a variety of incidents, from fires and bus accidents to hacked networks, and allow members to work out approaches to communications as well as physical response. They draft sample communications, which can be adapted for use in real situations later.

Most incidents at schools are mild, and the IRT practices for these situations as well as the more serious scenarios most people think of when they imagine a school emergency. Considering context is key. In rural Massachusetts, for example, it is much more likely that a bear will lumber onto campus than it is a dangerous person will threaten the community. As the main campus includes acres of forest, fires or felled trees are a source of concern, as are

damaging ice storms. The school is located on a busy commuter road, and school safety officers have occasionally been asked to assist motorists who were injured in a traffic accident.

## BUILDING TRUST

As schools know well, open communication builds trust, and Miss Hall's IRT works hard to communicate regularly with the school community. The team regularly shares the topics they discuss and reasons for the decisions made with all stakeholders. "I think the transparency and the quickness of the communication has built a lot of trust and respect for the work that is being done," said Aldrich.

Aldrich also credits the IRT's accomplishments to an egalitarian philosophy and nimbleness. Any team member is empowered to call a meeting if they see the need to respond to an incident or proactively address a concern; the process for calling a meeting is deliberately simple. And every member's perspective is valued. "Every opinion matters and is shared. It's not a top-down team. The head of school isn't even the chair, which speaks to the approach," explained Aldrich. Unencumbered by bureaucracy, Miss Hall's IRT can share knowledge and concerns freely, providing for an efficient and effective discussion. **N**

## An Incident Response Team's First Year

In the first year of an incident response team, establishing a team charter will help delineate responsibilities and establish policies for regular meetings, trainings and protocols for emergency meetings and team-member replacements. Agendas should allow time to establish a baseline for training and team building. Developing a process for communicating with the community and developing a rapport with local emergency responders are also important.

Aldrich recommends hiring a consultant to help develop the team and guide it during its first year. An IRT "doesn't just come together on its own," he said. While expensive, companies with this particular expertise can help the team avoid dangers that can be more costly to the school than a consultant.



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