

Indiana Office of School Safety Tabletop Toolkit #3

School Safety Tabletop Exercises [2026]

The Indiana Department of Homeland Security's Office of School Safety has developed a Tabletop Toolkit featuring 10 discussion-based exercises. These scenarios are designed to engage school officials, administrators, educators, SROs and staff in evaluating their responses to various safety situations. Each exercise includes a brief scenario followed by targeted questions that prompt reflection and dialogue. Tabletop exercises are flexible, often completed in just a few minutes, and serve to reinforce participants' understanding of emergency operations plans.

TABLETOP EXERCISE OVERVIEW

Step 1 PREPARE	Select a relevant scenario and identify staff members to participate.
Step 2 EXERCISE	Allocate time for staff to discuss the scenario and respond to guiding questions.
Step 3 ANALYZE	Review responses to identify strengths, gaps and potential training needs.
Scope	Designed for 5–10 minute discussions during school safety team or all-staff meetings.
Mission Area(s)	Prevention, Protection, Response and Recovery
Contact	<p>For any questions, help or more resources, feel free to contact the Indiana Office of School Safety.</p> <p>Director Julie Q Smith JuliSmith@dhs.IN.gov</p> <p>Deputy Director Rusty Goodpaster RGoodpaster@dhs.IN.gov</p> <p>Deputy Director Dr. Chad Crews ChCrews@dhs.IN.gov</p> <p>School Safety Specialist Ryan Stewart RyStewart@dhs.IN.gov</p> <p>School Safety Specialist Deanna Thomas DeanThomas@dhs.IN.gov</p>

EXERCISE 1: UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS

SCENARIO

Your school IT technician notices unusual overnight logins to the student information system using a staff member’s account, with access logs showing that large amounts of student demographic data may have been viewed or downloaded. The staff member reports receiving a suspicious email asking them to verify their credentials and worries they may have clicked it. At the same time, teachers report slow gradebook performance, and several parents call saying they received strange emails requesting updated emergency contacts. Rumors begin circulating on social media, and district leadership is asking for immediate clarification on whether this constitutes a data breach that must be publicly disclosed.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your initial thoughts/actions?	
Who needs to be informed right away?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What steps should be taken to secure systems and accounts?	
How should you coordinate with IT, administration and possibly law enforcement?	
How do you determine whether this requires public notification?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What communication gaps became apparent?	
What long-term steps could reduce the likelihood of a similar breach?	

EXERCISE 2: TWO POINT SHOT

SCENARIO

During a packed Friday night basketball game, several staff members outside hear what they believe are gunshots coming from the far end of the school parking lot. Spectators begin noticing flashing lights and commotion through the lobby windows, and a few students run inside saying they saw people arguing near a vehicle just before the shots were fired. The game is still in progress, families are arriving and leaving and no one inside has clear information about what is happening outside.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What information is missing that you would want right away?	
Who inside the building needs to be informed first?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What is your first priority once you hear reports of gunfire outside?	
How should communication be handled between administrators, event staff and coaches?	
What considerations apply to reunification, dismissal or continuation of the event?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What challenges or confusion could have emerged during the incident?	
How will you evaluate whether staff and community members feel confident after the response?	

EXERCISE 3: WHITEOUT LOCK-IN

SCENARIO

A sudden and intense winter storm moves in faster than forecasted, dropping heavy snow and causing whiteout conditions just as students are preparing for dismissal. Buses are unable to leave the lot, several staff members report that nearby roads are already impassable and families begin calling the front office saying they cannot reach the school. Power flickers but remains on, and the cafeteria staff notes they have limited food prepared for the evening.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What concerns you most about the timing of the storm?	
What information do you need right away to make decisions?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

How do you coordinate with transportation and emergency management?	
How will you organize supervision for students across the building?	
What message, if any, should be sent to parents or the school community?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What challenges or confusion could have emerged during the incident?	
What gaps in preparedness became apparent?	

EXERCISE 4: A PUFF OF PANIC

SCENARIO

During the last period of the day, a student in a hallway restroom begins feeling dizzy, disoriented and short of breath after using a vape they brought from home. Another student finds them sitting on the floor, pale and shaky and quickly alerts a nearby teacher. The student reports that the vape “felt different” and that they may have taken several strong inhalations. Shortly after disclosing this the student passes out. A small group of students gather outside the restroom, and word spreads quickly through the hallway.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What concerns you most about the student's condition?	
What assumptions should you avoid making about the substance involved?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What is your first priority once the student is found in distress?	
What considerations apply if the vape device is still present at the scene?	
How do you determine whether outside agencies (EMS, law enforcement) need to be involved?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What gaps in supervision, policy or training became apparent?	
What long-term steps could reduce the likelihood of similar incidents?	

EXERCISE 5: PARKING LOT PUZZLE

SCENARIO

Over the past two weeks, a high school has been experiencing a series of vehicle break-ins in the student parking lot. Incidents have occurred during school hours and after school events. Items that have been reported stolen include backpacks, electronics and loose valuables. No vehicles have been stolen, but several windows have been broken or damaged. Students and parents are becoming increasingly concerned, and rumors are spreading on social media with no suspect identified.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What concerns might students, staff and parents have right away?	
How might social media activity influence your initial response?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

How will you coordinate with local law enforcement?	
What communication, if any, should be sent to students, staff and families?	
What role should administrators, SROs and security staff play during this response?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What long-term prevention strategies should be considered?	
Are there environmental or procedural changes that could reduce future incidents?	

EXERCISE 6: AIR QUALITY ALARM

SCENARIO

On a Tuesday morning around 10:15 a.m., several students and a teacher in the gym report a strong odor resembling rotten eggs. The teacher notifies the main office, and within minutes, additional reports come in from nearby classrooms. Some students begin posting about the smell on social media, causing concern among parents. The HVAC system is running, and it's unclear whether the odor is localized or spreading. The school's maintenance staff is on-site, but the district facilities team and local fire department have not yet been contacted. No one has reported feeling ill, but anxiety is rising among students and staff.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What information do you need first to determine the severity of the situation?	
How do you determine whether to evacuate, shelter in place or investigate further?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What steps should be taken immediately to ensure student and staff safety?	
Who is responsible for assessing the source of the odor before emergency responders arrive?	
How will you manage student movement if the odor is spreading through the building?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Are there facility or infrastructure issues that would need follow-up?	
What lessons should be incorporated into future training, drills or emergency plans?	

EXERCISE 7: FIELD TRIP FIASCO

SCENARIO

A group of middle school students is on a field trip to a local museum. Around 11:20 a.m., while the group is transitioning between exhibits, a student collapses and begins experiencing seizure-like activity. Several students witness the event and become visibly upset. The teacher leading the trip calls for assistance from museum staff while trying to keep the area clear. The student's medical history is not immediately known to the staff on-site.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What other information do you need right away to understand the severity of the situation?	
What steps need to be taken immediately involving student safety and first aid?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

How will you manage the rest of the students during the incident?	
How will you determine whether the field trip continues, pauses or ends early?	
How will you handle parents calling the school after hearing from their children?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What improvements could be made to field trip planning or medical preparedness?	
What follow-up is needed with the student, family and classmates who witnessed the event?	

EXERCISE 8: ANONYMOUS ALERT

SCENARIO

At 9:40 a.m. on a regular school day, the front office phone rings. The receptionist answers, expecting a parent or staff call. Instead, a calm but tense voice says they are inside the building and claim to have placed an explosive device somewhere on school grounds. The caller does not provide a location, motive or timeline before abruptly hanging up.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What information do you need right away to assess the credibility of the threat?	
What existing emergency procedures come to mind that need to be followed?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

How do you communicate with staff without causing panic?	
What responsibilities fall to administrators, front office staff and the SRO?	
What is your reunification plan if evacuation becomes necessary?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Are roles and responsibilities clear to everyone involved?	
Do existing protocols support your decision-making?	

EXERCISE 9: THE HIDDEN REPLICA

SCENARIO

During the transition between classes, a student approaches a teacher looking visibly shaken. They report that another student showed them something in their backpack that “looked like a handgun.” The reporting student said the object was dark, heavy-looking and shaped like a pistol. They add that during their interaction, the student with the object lifted it just enough for them to see the handle and said, “Back off or else. The reporting student insists it looked real but mentions that the student with the object seemed almost casual about handling it, as if it wasn’t as heavy as they expected. No staff have yet interacted with the student who allegedly has the weapon.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What stands out to you in the reporting student’s description?	
What is your first step after receiving this report?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What factors influence whether you initiate a hold, lockdown or targeted response?	
What communication channels would you use to inform staff?	
What message, if any, should be sent to families or the school community?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What follow-up support might students or staff need after the incident?	
Do any procedures feel unclear, outdated or difficult to follow?	

EXERCISE 10: THE ONLINE ULTIMATUM

SCENARIO

A student approaches a trusted staff member looking anxious and hesitant. They explain that someone they met online has been messaging them repeatedly. The person is now threatening to share something embarrassing unless the student sends “more.” The student won’t say exactly what was shared but mentions they “made a mistake,” and the person is now demanding things the student is uncomfortable with. The messages have become more urgent, and the student says the person claims to know their school and friends. The student is scared, unsure what to do and worried about getting in trouble.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What additional information do you need before making decisions?	
How do you interpret the student’s fear of “getting in trouble”?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

Who needs to be notified, and in what order?	
How do you support the student while gathering necessary information?	
How do you handle the digital evidence (messages, screenshots, usernames)?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What follow-up support might the student need after the incident?	
How might this scenario inform future digital safety education for students?	