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National Study on School Disaster Preparedness Shows Many Schools Unprepared

LITTLE ROCK — A national study conducted by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) and Arkansas Children's Hospital Research Institute (ACHRI) has shown that many public school districts have important deficiencies in their emergency and disaster plans.

The results of "Mass Casualty Events at School: A National Preparedness Survey" will be published in the Jan. 3 issue of *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The object of the study was to document the preparedness of public schools in the United States for the prevention of and response to a mass casualty event.

The study included a random survey of 3,670 school superintendents throughout the country. According to the Web site of the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, there were about 14,000 public school districts in the United States in 2004.

While 86.3 percent of respondents reported having a mass casualty response plan, only 57.2 percent have a written plan for prevention of such an event. Most school districts (66.2 percent) do not use any form of student identification such as badges or cards. Almost half (48.5 percent) do not require staff or teacher identification, and 30 percent have never conducted an emergency drill.

"In many communities throughout the United States, more people are gathered on a daily basis in school settings than in any other location," said James Graham, M.D., professor of pediatrics at UAMS and a researcher at ACHRI. "The school shootings and terrorist events of recent years have made us even more aware that we must be prepared for the possibility of a mass casualty event at a school."

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Graham is lead investigator for the study. Other authors, all UAMS faculty and researchers at ACHRI, are Steve Shirm, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics; Rebecca Liggin, M.D., assistant professor of emergency medicine and pediatrics; Mary Aitken, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics; and Rhonda Dick, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics.

Overall, the study concluded that personnel at urban schools are better prepared in almost all areas to handle a mass casualty emergency than those at rural schools. At the same time, almost one-fourth (22.1 percent) of respondents reported that they have no disaster provisions for children with special needs, nor do they have a plan for post-disaster counseling (25 percent).

“Good disaster response planning requires broad involvement of several community groups,” Graham said. “Pediatricians, local school officials, school nurses, public health officials, emergency officials and school physicians should work together to improve the preparedness of schools for the unwelcome possibility of a mass casualty event.”

UAMS is the state’s only comprehensive academic health center, with five colleges, a graduate school, a medical center, five centers of excellence and a statewide network of regional centers. UAMS has about 2,320 students and 690 residents and is the state’s largest public employer with almost 9,000 employees. UAMS and its affiliates have an economic impact in Arkansas of \$4.3 billion a year. For more information, visit www.uams.edu.

ACHRI is a not-for-profit corporation that was created to provide a research environment on the Arkansas Children’s Hospital campus to meet the needs of the UAMS physicians and researchers on staff at Arkansas Children’s Hospital. Arkansas Children’s Hospital is a comprehensive clinical, research and teaching affiliate of the UAMS College of Medicine. For more information, visit <http://achri.ach.uams.edu>.

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