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Media Contact: NASP Director of Communications, Kathy Cowan kcowan@naspweb.org

NASP and NASRO Urge Accuracy With Regard to Lockdown Versus Other Types of Armed Assailant Drills

Bethesda, MD—The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) are encouraged that leading education and safety organizations are speaking out on the potential benefits and risks associated with training students and staff to protect against an active, armed assailant. While the statistical probability that a school will experience an active assailant event is extremely low, concern about the possibility is high on people’s minds. Skills development and preparedness are critical, but these goals can be accomplished without inflicting psychological harm on students or staff. How drills and training options are portrayed is important to this mission. We offer the following clarification regarding school lockdown and other types of armed assailant drills.

The term *active shooter drills* has become an unhelpful catch-all for what are very different types of drills, in particular conflating *lockdown*, options-based *active assailant* drills, and full-scale exercises. These drills are not the same but rather exist on a continuum of options that school districts face in safety preparedness planning. This conflation causes confusion among the public, school leaders, and even law enforcement, and it risks undermining effective school safety planning.

School leaders need to consider the actual purpose of a drill, who should be involved based on their roles, and what is the most effective—and least harmful—context within which to conduct these drills. In addition, they need to balance the benefits of safety skills development with the costs of lost instructional time and the potential of being exposed to traumatic stress due to the nature and frequency of these drills. Too much, too often is not helpful. To help strike this balance, school-employed mental health professionals, like school psychologists, should be part of the planning team that designs and evaluates the appropriateness of any drill —along with school administrators and school resource officers (SROs).

Ultimately, a primary purpose of any safety training is for *adults*—school staff members and emergency responders—to understand and be confident in their responsibilities and to be able to direct students appropriately. These responsibilities differ significantly based on roles. School administrators and safety/emergency response team leaders and emergency responders or law enforcement have a higher, more intensive need to practice and evaluate the spectrum of response options, which can require more complex drill scenarios. Teachers and other school personnel need to understand the protocols for specific situations, the methods for communications, how to instruct and keep students calm, when and how to make decisions (e.g., when to run, hide, or fight) if a situation should evolve. Students primarily need to know the importance of following the instruction of trusted school staff members, be able to understand what the adults are likely to instruct them to do, and (for older students) know how to keep themselves safe and protected in the event they are in a life-threatening situation.

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NASP and NASRO urge the media, educators, law enforcement, and other school safety leaders to more clearly describe and represent the following distinctions.

Lockdown drills (AKA “Hard Lockdown”) have been conducted for decades, *do not* involve play-acting or sensorial components, and have been documented to be effective. **They are an essential part of school safety preparedness.** When done appropriately, they align with fire or dangerous weather drills in how they are conducted and should not elevate anxiety. Specifically, lockdown drills involve sheltering in a secure location, locking the door, moving students out of sight, and requiring students to remain quiet. In practice, lockdowns have a well-established history of keeping students and school staff members safe when presented with real threats of harm. These drills are intended to teach and practice basic skills regardless of the specific imminent threat, starting with following the instructions of the trusted adult in charge. All participants and the community should know ahead of time that the drill will take place and what to expect, including what announcement will be made or what bell will sound to start the drill. Emergency responders and law enforcement (other than the SROs) are not typically part of the on-campus drill, but they may be invited to observe the drill depending on state laws. These drills are appropriate for most students and staff members when done properly. However, attention should always be paid to students who might present specific vulnerabilities, such as those with previous trauma risk or disabilities.

Options-based drills teach strategies in addition to lockdown (hide), such as evacuation (run) or distraction (fight) techniques. **These are not lockdown drills** (rather, lockdown is one element of an options-based approach), and they often create the gray areas in which many schools find themselves. If a school determines to teach optional responses to a specific threat, such drills should be conducted in a nonsimulation, nonsensorial way. Strategies can be offered as classroom lessons, wherein students are told about the different options that adult staff members may consider as they strive to ensure student safety. Options-based drills are appropriate for most adults and for *some* older middle and high school students, with careful attention to age, developmental appropriateness, and any trauma risk factors. If state laws require that this type of drill also be done with elementary students, it must be done in a developmentally appropriate fashion. This includes using words at a preschool level, focusing on following adult instruction, and not teaching the distraction (fight) techniques. All participants and the whole community should know when a drill will take place, and potential participants (and parents) should have clear opt-out opportunities. School leaders, SROs, and local law enforcement may be involved in teaching techniques. At no point should students be given the instruction or impression that they are expected to act as heroes in a life-threatening situation.

Full-scale simulation drills, or “live” exercises, are complex, costly, and involve play-acting and highly sensorial components. They were originally designed for emergency responders and law enforcement, members of the school crisis team, and other school leaders responsible for implementing a response to an imminent threat. The primary purpose should be to help these adults test their protocols and identify possible gaps, as well as to equip crisis responders and school leaders with the skills required to lead a response. It is not necessary or appropriate for most students, in particular younger students and those with histories of traumatic stress, to participate in these drills. **Any staff or students involved should be volunteers and must be carefully selected.** For example, persons with histories of exposure to extreme traumatic stressors should not participate. Student volunteers must have parental permission. These exercises should be conducted during nonschool hours, and the school and broader community should be informed ahead of time that they are taking place.

Being clear on the differences in these drill types and how to mitigate unnecessary negative consequences helps decision-makers focus on the appropriate drills for the purpose and participants intended, ultimately safeguarding the physical *and* psychological safety of all students and staff.

For further information, see NASP/NASRO guidance document, **Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills** at <https://www.nasponline.org/armed-assailant-drills>

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