

Spotlight Article:

Reunification: The Details That Make the Difference

by Kim Lohse, *Deputy Superintendent, Addison School District 4*

Effective reunification begins long before an emergency occurs. Teams must understand their roles and have a plan in place before students need to be reunited with their families.

For many Illinois school districts, the Standard Reunification Method (SRM), developed by The “I Love U Guys” Foundation, is already a familiar part of emergency operations planning. However, having a plan and being prepared to execute it are two different things.

> *Reunification is more than identifying a location where parents can pick up their children.*

It is an accountability, communication, security, and family-support operation requiring coordination among school administrators, school resource officers (SROs), law enforcement, dispatch, fire departments, transportation personnel, hospitals, and other community partners. The greatest opportunities for improvement often lie in the details that are easy to overlook during planning, but become significant challenges during an actual event.

Start With the Decision and the First Message

School safety teams should establish who has the authority to initiate reunification, who assumes that responsibility if the primary decision-maker is unavailable, and how decisions are communicated to responding agencies.

The first message to families is equally important. Unclear or premature notifications can send parents to an affected school, create traffic congestion, or direct families to a location that is not ready. Determine who approves and sends notifications, how updates will be provided if plans change, and how to reach families who speak different languages or lack reliable access to digital communications.

Parents may receive information through social media or news outlets before receiving an official district message. Plan for conflicting information, not just the ideal notification sequence. In our community, we work collaboratively with the police and fire departments to ensure all communications are the same and go out around the same time to eliminate some of these challenges.

Questions for your safety team:

- Who can authorize reunification if the primary decision-maker is unavailable?
- Who sends the initial parent notification, and what must be confirmed before it goes out?
- How will families receive updates if the location changes or normal communication systems fail?

Think Beyond the Reunification Site

A site that looks suitable during a walkthrough may present significant challenges during an emergency. Teams should evaluate traffic flow, parking, emergency vehicle access, accessibility, weather exposure, and space for students, families, and responders. Additionally, sites too close to the impacted site could be problematic if there is a large response by first responders.

Identify primary and alternate locations far enough away from all the schools in your district. Establish who will redirect parents who arrive at the original school. SROs and local law enforcement can provide valuable input on site security, traffic control, and coordination with dispatch. These responsibilities should be established before an incident occurs.

Questions for your safety team:

- Have we identified and evaluated alternate reunification sites?
- Who will manage traffic and redirect parents who arrive at the wrong location?
- Can emergency vehicles access the site without interference from arriving families?

Maintain Accountability From Start to Finish

When students must be transported to another location, accountability must continue throughout the transfer. Districts should have a process for verifying which students are accounted for at the impacted site, as well as, a secondary check when they arrive at the reunification site.

A student who cannot be accounted for at the reunification site may have been transported by EMS for medical evaluation or treatment, taken to a hospital, or moved with another authorized group. It is important that the reunification process distinguishes an actual missing student from a student whose location is known but whose status has not yet been documented or communicated.

Equally important is ensuring that parents and guardians are notified as promptly as possible when their child has been transported to a hospital or another location for care. Whenever feasible, this communication should occur before parents or guardians arrive at the reunification site, helping to reduce confusion, anxiety, and unnecessary delays during an already stressful situation.

Districts and local first responders should collaboratively establish protocols for communicating student transportation, medical transfers, and other authorized movements to the reunification team in real time. Clear procedures for documenting student status, verifying information, and notifying families will help ensure that parents and guardians receive timely and consistent information, reunification staff can accurately account for every student, and families are treated with compassion and care throughout the process.

Districts should also prepare for network disruptions or unavailable student information systems. Secure backup records and a workable manual process can help maintain accountability when technology fails.

Questions for your safety team:

- How will the reunification team be promptly informed when a student is transported by EMS, taken to a hospital, or moved to another authorized location?
- How will we verify whether a student is truly unaccounted for versus already transported or relocated but not yet documented?
- Who is responsible for notifying parents or guardians when their child is transported to a hospital or another location, and how will we ensure notification occurs before they arrive at the reunification site whenever feasible?

Plan for Exceptions and Define Roles

Real-world situations do not always fit neatly into a standard process. A parent may arrive without identification, a custody restriction may complicate a release, or two adults may disagree over who is authorized to take a student.

Establish who can resolve exceptions, what documentation is required, and when an administrator or law enforcement officer should be consulted. Staff should have a clear escalation process rather than improvising decisions under pressure.

SROs can help bridge the gap between school operations and law enforcement, but the process should not depend on one individual being available to handle every responsibility. Identify backup personnel for critical roles and plan for staff relief during extended operations.

Questions for your safety team:

- Who handles disputed releases, missing identification, or custody concerns?
- Are school staff, SROs, dispatch, and other responding agencies clear on their respective responsibilities?
- Who serves as backup if a key team member is unavailable or needs relief?

Remember the Human Side

Students may be injured, frightened, overwhelmed, or in need of medical or behavioral support. Families may need language interpretation, accessibility accommodations, or assistance understanding what has happened.

Safety teams should plan for these needs and establish how medical, behavioral health, and family-support resources will be requested. Site security and student privacy must also be considered, particularly when law enforcement is still investigating the original incident.

Questions for your safety team:

- How will we accommodate students and families with medical, mobility, communication, or language needs?
- Where can staff provide private assistance to distressed families?
- How will we request additional medical, behavioral health, or family-support resources during an extended operation?

Exercise the Complications

Whenever possible, districts should conduct exercises at the actual reunification site to better identify potential challenges with traffic patterns, vehicle and pedestrian flow, site access, security, signage, and the movement of students and families. Practicing at the site also allows teams to evaluate whether the location can accommodate the anticipated number of families, determine how students will be received and accounted for, and identify areas where communication or coordination between school personnel and first responders

may break down. These exercises provide an opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities, evaluate decision-making processes, and make adjustments before the plan must be implemented under stressful circumstances. Following each exercise, teams should conduct a debrief to document lessons learned, assign responsibility for addressing identified gaps, and update procedures as needed.

Questions for your safety team:

- Have we practiced scenarios in which our primary site, communication systems, or student records are unavailable?
- Do our exercises include transportation problems and unusual release situations?
- Who tracks corrective actions, and how do we verify that identified gaps have been addressed?

A Final Consideration for School Safety Teams

Reunification planning is an opportunity for SROs to contribute well beyond the immediate response to an emergency. Working with administrators, dispatchers, first responders, transportation personnel, and community partners before an incident occurs helps ensure the process is practical, coordinated, and responsive to students and families.

The Standard Reunification Method provides a framework. The quality of implementation depends on how well a district prepares for exceptions, coordinates its partners, and practices decisions that must be made under pressure.

Successful reunification requires more than a written plan. It requires clear roles, joint practice, and the ability to adapt when circumstances change.

About the Author

Kim Lohse is the Deputy Superintendent for Administrative Services in Addison School District 4- responsible for overseeing personnel, policy, and safety/security for the school district. She has collaborated with emergency responders in Addison and DuPage County to lead small, medium, and full-scale safety exercises. Additionally, she is an active member of the DuPage County School Safety Network, works as an instructor for the IL Fire Service Institute delivering School Safety and Violent Incident Management (SSAVEIM)/reunification training across the state, is an Educational Representative on the IL School Resource Officers Association Board, and delivers customized school safety training courses to interested school districts.