



CMCSS Reunification Guidelines Clarksville-Montgomery County School System (SAF-G008)

Overview

A **Reunification** procedure is used when it is necessary to release students directly to their parent, guardian or designated emergency contact due to an emergency situation that prevents a normal dismissal. Situations which may require a *Reunification* include, but are not limited to:

- Fire or Damage to a School Building,
- Natural Disaster,
- Field Trip Emergency or School Bus Accident,
- Violence in the Surrounding Community,
- A Situation involving a Threat, Weapons or Violence at School.

A well-organized *Reunification* process will help to reduce anxiety during a potentially stressful situation and reunite children with their families in a **structured, timely & safe** manner.

Key Components: Key components to our Reunification process include:

1. Choosing a **Location** early on in the crisis and deciding whether the Reunification should take place on- or off-campus.
2. Timely and consistent **Communications**, with parents, school staff and students;
3. Designating and managing five distinct **Staging Areas**. A Guardian Check-in Area, a Guardian Waiting Area, Student Supervision Area, Information Area, and Incident Command Area.
4. The safe **Release** of students to their parent, guardian or designated emergency contact.

Choosing a Location

Many circumstances surrounding the emergency will impact decisions about the best location to conduct a *Reunification*. The school administrator, in consultation with the CMCSS District Office and the Police or Fire Incident Commander (if they are involved), will decide whether to hold the reunification on the school campus or at an off-campus location. Here are considerations for each:

On-Campus Reunification:

Depending on the situation, you may be able to stage the reunification at your school. Logistically, this is the easiest solution since students are already there, secured, and won't have to be transported. You may choose an *On-Campus Reunification* if the conditions on campus are safe, if it does not interfere with a crime scene or fire/rescue operations, and if roads are open and accessible to parents and guardians, or in any other situation that seems appropriate. If an *On-Campus Reunification* is chosen, decide if you can use indoor staging areas or if it will be necessary to hold the Reunification outside. You may even use a combination of indoor and outdoor staging areas. Weather may be a factor. *Campus Reunification* will need to be made early in the crisis. Work with the CMCSS District Office to get a mass phone call sent to families, to arrange for buses and for assistance with logistics at the Reunification site.

Off-Campus Reunification:

In cases where it is not safe to remain on campus or where parents coming to and from the school may create more of a hazard, a Reunification may take place Off-Campus. Logistically, this is much more challenging since students and staff will need to be moved, either by bus or on foot, to the off-campus site. Securing and supervising students while in transit requires extra planning and diligence. And it may take time for bus drivers to report in. The decision to implement an *Off-*



Off-Campus Reunification sites are divided into two categories: 1) Near Campus: sites within walking distance, and 2) Away from Campus: sites which require buses to transport students. Potential *Off-Campus Reunification* sites include neighborhood churches, theaters, community centers, etc. This list is not publicized because every situation is different and decisions about using these sites are made based on the circumstances of each particular emergency. Also, publicizing this information could tip off someone aiming to cause harm, providing them an additional target. School Administrators can work to develop a partnership with the off-campus facility managers near their school in advance of an emergency so that in a real incident, a simple phone call can allow for quick access and use of the facility.

Communication

Communicating with Faculty and Staff:

Give clear instructions about the reunification plans to school staff using the intercom, email, runners and possibly even by using a megaphone if you are outside or in a large auditorium. Supplying school staff with information will not only calm them, but it will help them to manage students and the process more effectively. Prepare students for movement to the reunification area and explain what is being done and why. If applicable, prepare students to board buses or walk to an *Off-Campus Reunification* site. Work to keep students calm. When moving students to a reunification area, it is very important to keep everyone together and prevent students from wandering off. **Do not release students to parents while moving students to the Reunification Site.** Remind staff of this plan.

Communicating with Parents & Guardians:

Work with the CMCSS Communications Department to assist with parent notifications as soon as possible. Some options available that the Communications Department may recommend and support include mass phone calls, district or school websites, social media, and press releases, etc. Here is a sample message that could be sent to parents using our mass notification system:

This is an important message from Clarksville-Montgomery County School System. Today is Monday, February 29th. It is 2:30. The emergency situation at <<input school name>> is over. Please listen carefully to these student-release instructions. Parents, please go to the <<enter reunification area>> located at <<enter address>> to pick up your child. Do not come to the school. All students, including those who normally ride the bus, will be taken to the <<enter reunification area>> and released to parents and guardians there. Bring your photo identification with you to the <<enter reunification area>>. School staff will check your ID against a list of individuals approved to sign out each student. This is for the safety of your child. Thank you for your patience as we work to reunite you with your child.

Print out a similar statement to be kept at all office phones so that office staff can relay a consistent message. Fax or email a copy of the statement to neighboring schools and to the 911 Dispatch Center as they often receive calls from concerned parents and community members and this will allow everyone to give out the same instructions. Refer media inquiries to the CMCSS Communications Department.

Staging Areas

It is not uncommon for news of school crisis incidents to result in parents, guardians and loved ones rushing to the school or reunification site to pick up their children. In a major crisis, several adults for each student may come. Parents may become frustrated by heavy traffic, parking challenges and uncertainty about how to sign-out their students. You will need to be very organized at the reunification site in order to reduce stress and work to provide a safe structure in which to conduct the reunification. It is important to designate and manage five distinct Staging Areas:

- 1) Guardian Check-in-Area – This is the area where staff will distribute reunification cards to families for them to complete.
- 2) Guardian Waiting Area – This is the area where families will wait for their students to be brought to them by “staff runners.”



3) Student Supervision Area - This is where you will continue to supervise, secure, and care for students until they are each individually reunited with family.

4) Information Area - This area is where families will be directed if there is more information involving their student's location. There will also be counselors in this area if needed.

5) Incident Command Area - This area will be for school leadership, district leadership, law enforcement leadership, and any other involved decision makers.

Designate a different person to be in charge of each distinct area and a team to assist in each area.

Logistics & Set-up:

Staff working in the Family Reunification areas should bring their two-way radios and wear identifying vests and ID badges. Bring your Reunification Supplies, which contains your student emergency contact information and has your Family Reunification vests, signage and forms in the bottom section of the kit. Arrange for tables, chairs, pop-up tents, and other resources to be brought to the Family Reunification site. Consider having security, law enforcement, an administrator and a staff member who speaks Spanish at or near the Parent Check-In Area.

As Guardians Arrive:

As guardians begin to arrive, calmly give them a **Reunification Card**. This card gives some details on what to expect of the process and provides a mechanism for school staff to match up students with the appropriate parent, guardian or designated emergency contact. Ask Guardian to complete Section 1 of the form, go to the Guardian Check-In Area and get in line according to their child's last name, and turn in the form and be prepared to show picture ID. If they don't have ID, direct them to the "No ID" line. Reassure parents. Thank them for their patience as the school works to safely reunite them with their student(s).

Check-in Area:

At the Check-in Area, staff will fill out Section 2 of the Reunification Card once it is handed to them. Staff should follow the checklist on the card. Using the Student Emergency Contact List, staff will verify that the person requesting the student is on the list. They will then check the guardian's ID against the list, and circle their name on the list. Once verified, staff should ask the guardian to proceed to the Family Waiting Area, which is where they will be reunited with their student, or to the Information Area where they will be provided further information by Staff. Give the completed form to a "Staff Runner" who will retrieve the student and complete Section 3.

For family members who do not have the appropriate identification, work with your staff who know your families to help identify them and get them through the process. However, **do not release a student to anyone who is not authorized on the student's paperwork, even if the child claims to know the person.** If they become argumentative or uncooperative, notify the nearest supervisor and/or law enforcement official.

Student Supervision Area:

The Student Supervision Area must be physically separate and out of view from the Guardian Check-in Area and the Guardian Waiting Area. If indoors, you may decide to keep students in classrooms or move them to a central location like a gym, cafeteria, media center or common area. If outdoors, a fenced in area such as a ball field or grandstands may suffice. In some situations, a Student Supervision Area may even be inside buses. In any case, consider how you will meet basic needs such as toilets, warmth, water, etc. Students in the supervision area should be coordinated by grade level and homeroom teacher. You will also need "Staff Runners" to retrieve students from the Student Supervision Area and bring them to the Guardian Waiting Area to be reunited with their families.

The Staff Runner will: 1) Receive a verified Reunification Card from the Parent Check-in Area Staff; 2) Take the Reunification Card to the Student Supervision Area to retrieve the student named on the card and remind the teacher to



mark the student “released” on their student roster; and 3) Take the student with them to the Family Waiting Area to complete the Reunification Card and reunite the student with their family.

Guardian Waiting Area:

The Guardian Waiting Area is where families will wait for their children to be retrieved by the “Staff Runners.” This is also where they will be reunited with their children. This process will take some time and parents may become stressed and impatient. Consider setting up an information table at the Guardian Waiting Area. Provide staff who can remain calm, understanding and professional to answer questions and reassure parents. You may want to use staff who already know the families and have a good rapport with them. Include staff who speak Spanish if needed.

Ensuring a Safe Release of Students to Families

Release & Reunification:

At the *Guardian Waiting Area*, the Staff Runner will call out the name of the adult listed in Section 1 on the Reunification Form who is approved to pick up the student. Verify Photo ID again, if necessary. Complete Section 3 of the Card. Have the Parent/Guardian sign for the student and indicate where they are going next. The Staff Runner signs and notes the time of release. The Reunification Cards are retained by the school and stored alphabetically by the last name of the student. Now the Student can be released to their parent or guardian.

Conclusion

While school emergency situations requiring Reunification are rare, they do occur with enough frequency that it is necessary to have a well-defined process and the supplies ready in order to implement it. Understanding these concepts, knowing your role, and remaining calm during a real emergency situation will help students and parents through a potentially chaotic and stressful time as we work to bring families back together safely.