

Why all schools ought to install fire sprinklers

The Illinois Senate on Monday passed a law requiring fire sprinklers in all public school buildings built after July 1, 1992, but hundreds of existing school buildings will not be protected.

That probably doesn't make sense to the average citizen, who would ask one simple question: Are sprinklers needed in the schools or aren't they?



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The Illinois Professional Firefighters Association, the Illinois Fire Inspectors Association, the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association and the state fire marshal's office have all gone on record in support of automatic sprinklers in the schools.

But the bill that unanimously passed the Senate and previously had passed the House does not address the issue of retrofitting old school buildings.

Why? Politics.

Education lobbyists, who had blocked sprinkler bills in the past, wanted assurances that any law would not add to the mounting financial burden of school districts.

By limiting the law to new schools (and large-scale remodeling and reconstruction projects), the sponsors of the bill made the case that no new funding would be needed.

Sen. William Mahar (R-19th) and Rep. Mary Lou Cowlshaw (R-41st) did this by relaxing requirements for fire-resistant construction materials in new schools.

By installing automatic sprinklers, firefighting experts maintained, the relaxed construction codes would place children at no greater risk and might actually save the schools some money.

But there was no sure way to save money by retrofitting old school buildings with sprinklers, although some firemen make the argument that insurance costs would be reduced.

Rather than take on the entire education establishment, Cowlshaw decided to ignore the issue of retrofitting.

The reality is that the bill would not have passed if it required retrofitting and Cowlshaw and Mahar are to be congratulated for putting political pragmatism above pie-in-the-sky idealism in this case.

Ironically, as time passed and fire prevention techniques improved, the "tougher" school building codes became outdated.

Buhs and Lia told me that firefighting experts throughout the state had been waging a four-year battle to change the state law.

Some of the organizations that campaigned for the fire sprinkler bill were the Illinois Firefighters Association, Illinois Fire Chiefs Association, Illinois Fire Inspectors Association and the state fire marshal's office.

Sponsors of the bill in the Illinois General Assembly were state Sen. William Mahar (R-19th), whose district includes Orland Park, and state Rep. Mary Lou Cowlshaw (R-Naperville).

"One of the significant features of this bill, in addition to potentially saving the lives of schoolchildren, is that it will reduce the cost of school construction to taxpayers," Mahar said.

"Because sprinklers will be installed, other expensive fire prevention features will no longer be necessary in school buildings. Fire insurance premiums will also be reduced."

Legislators were forced to relax construction codes and reduce school building costs in order to satisfy school lobbyists who opposed the fire sprinkler bill.

While fire officials at first were reluctant to make such concessions, they eventually agreed that more expensive, fire-resistant construction materials would not be necessary if fire sprinklers were installed in school buildings.

Lia called Edgar's signing of the bill "a great achievement for Cowlshaw, Mahar and all the people in the fire service."

Throughout the campaign, Lia and other firefighting experts had argued that buildings equipped with fire sprinklers experience fewer fatalities during fires, fewer serious injuries and sustain less property damage than buildings without sprinklers.

By detecting fires early, the fire official said, fire sprinkler systems can extinguish or contain a blaze in the crucial minutes between the time firefighters are called and when they arrive on the scene.

"This not only gives children and teachers more time to escape, but reduces the risk of serious injury to firefighters who have to risk their lives battling fires," Lia said.

The bill signed by Edgar will require sprinkler systems in all new schools, additions to existing schools and remodeling projects involving more than 50 percent of the school facility.

In addition, the state board of education is mandated to establish rules and regulations for the fire safety systems that are consistent with nationally recognized standards.