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Edgar signs bill on fire sprinklers in public schools

Gov. Jim Edgar on Friday signed legislation requiring fire sprinkler systems in new public school buildings beginning July 1, 1992, and in any existing school that undergoes "substantial" remodeling.

"This legislation will correct an oversight in state law that required sprinklers in all public buildings except schools," the governor said in a telephone call to the *The Daily*



PHIL KADNER

Southtown Economist.

"It makes sense to extend the same protection to our schoolchildren that occupants have in other buildings in Illinois," Edgar said.

The governor called the *Southtown Economist* to announce the signing in response to a series of columns in this space about the loophole in state law that made public school buildings exempt from municipal fire laws and state building codes.

"This is the first time I've ever done a bill-signing over the telephone," Edgar said. "I don't know if you can hear my pen scratching the paper, but I'm signing the bill right now."

My columns on the need for fire sprinklers in state schools were prompted by calls from Chief Robert Buhs and Inspector Tom Lia of the Orland Park Fire Protection District, who were waging a campaign to put sprinklers in Orland Park school buildings.

Buhs and Lia pointed out that following a 1958 fire at Our Lady of Angels parochial school in Chicago in which 92 students died, state legislators designed a set of tougher safety standards for schools than other buildings.

As a result, school construction was placed under the authority of the state board of education and exempted from all other state and municipal fire and construction guidelines.

Ironically, as time passed and fire prevention techniques improved, the "tougher" school building codes became outdated.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