

Why our schools are not as safe as a warehouse

There is no law in Illinois requiring sprinkler systems in school buildings.

Try building a warehouse in this state without a sprinkler system and fire inspectors will shut you down.

You can't construct a hotel, a large office building or a hospital without a sprinkler system because you would be violating municipal construction codes.



PHIL KADNER

But in Illinois, school buildings are exempt from municipal codes that require such fire prevention equipment.

"If we believe it is important to provide sprinkler systems in buildings to protect adults, why on earth wouldn't we do the same to protect children?" asked state Rep. Mary Lou Cowlishaw (R-41st) of Naperville.

Cowlishaw led an unsuccessful effort to pass such legislation in the Illinois House this fall and vows to sponsor such a law "again and again until it passes."

Why don't school buildings have to conform to the fire prevention standards governing the construction of any other building in Illinois?

Ironically, the reason is that state legislators were trying to make school buildings safer.

Following the Our Lady of the Angels Elementary School disaster in 1958, in which 96 children died in a fire, the state exempted schools from municipal building codes in order to create a stricter set of building guidelines for school buildings.

The State Board of Education's administrative code, while not requiring sprinklers, mandates that all schools be constructed from fire-resistant materials.

"But that doesn't mean you can't have a fire in such a building," said Tom Lia, a fire inspector for the Orland Fire Protection District who is leading a crusade to change the state's school building code.

Lia points to a fire last week at the Dogwood Elementary School in Park Forest that caused \$2.2 million in damage. According to police officials, Dogwood caught fire when children set fire to a pile of leaves outside the school building and the blaze spread to the school.

Because the fire occurred on a Sunday, there were no students inside the school.

"Even so, if the school building had been equipped with sprinklers, chances are good that the fire would not have been able to spread throughout the building," Lia said.

"It's been proven that sprinklers can save lives and property. That's why it's ridiculous not to have sprinklers in our schools."

An odd debate over sprinklers in the schools

All the fire experts I've talked to seem to agree: School buildings ought to have sprinkler systems.

And under most state and municipal fire codes, school buildings would be required to have sprinklers. Unfortunately, under state legislation passed decades ago, school districts are exempt from local fire laws.



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"If we go into a school building and find violations of the fire code, we can't even order school officials to make any changes," Deputy State Fire Marshal Jack Ahern said. "Until a few years ago, we weren't even allowed into school buildings to make fire inspections."

School officials I've spoken with have two reasons for not installing sprinklers in their schools.

1. Their schools follow the fire safety guidelines set by the Illinois Board of Education.
2. Fire sprinklers aren't needed because new school buildings are made of fire-resistant materials. (This generally refers to brick and concrete construction.)

If pressed, most school officials will eventually admit that the cost factor of fire sprinklers enters into their opposition.

No one, however, wants to be seen as putting the lives of school children in jeopardy in order to save a few pennies.

But experts in the field of fire prevention, such as Orland Park Fire Inspector Tom Lia, note that no school is fireproof. Lia points specifically to a fire that destroyed a "fire-resistant" school building in Park Forest Nov. 25.

That fire was caused when teenagers set fire to a pile of leaves outside the school building and the fire spread to the building, causing \$2.2 million in damage.

Fire officials claim the damage to the school building would have been minimal if it had a fire sprinkler system.

The Illinois Fire Chiefs Association and others have been lobbying lawmakers in Springfield to pass legislation that would mandate sprinklers in all school buildings.

But they have failed to receive widespread support for their efforts. Legislation mandating fire sprinklers has failed to get out of committee.

I'm told one argument that school officials make, with some impact, is that there hasn't been a school fire resulting in multiple deaths since the Our Lady of the Angels Elementary School fire in December 1958.

"But that doesn't mean school buildings are safe," Lia responds. "If children had been in the Park Forest school building when it caught fire, you might have had multiple injuries."

"Why wait for a tragedy to occur? Why not prevent the tragedy from happening to begin with?"

As far as the cost of sprinkler systems is concerned, Lia and other fire officials would like to see the issue brought to the ballot box. Firefighters are convinced that voters would be willing to accept a tax increase to purchase sprinklers once the issues are brought to their attention.

"There hasn't been a multiple death in a building protected by sprinklers in this nation's history," Lia said.

According to the National Fire Sprinkler Association, Inc., based in Patterson, N.Y., about 20 lives are lost each year in the United States in buildings protected by sprinklers, compared to 8,000 per year in buildings without fire sprinklers.

It's troubling to me that school officials and state legislators seem to be turning a deaf ear to the warnings of firefighters.

If all of the fire inspectors, fire chiefs and fire marshals are in agreement, I'm hard-pressed to understand why elected officials aren't lending their support to efforts to obtain sprinkler systems for the state's schools.

Orland to vote on sprinklers for its schools

Voters in Orland School District 135 will decide on April 2 whether to install fire suppression sprinklers in their schools.

The school board has approved tying the sprinkler question to a \$17 million bond referendum to build two school buildings. A district spokesman said \$2 million of the bond issue



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would be set aside to equip the two new school buildings with sprinklers and retrofit the nine existing school buildings in the district.

Sprinklers are not required in public school buildings under Illinois law.

The referendum is a victory of sorts for Robert Buhs, chief of the Orland Fire Protection District, who had campaigned for sprinkler systems in the new school buildings.

Orland School District 135 includes most of Orland Park and parts of Orland Hills and unincorporated Orland Township.

Buhs and his fire marshal, Tom Lia, noted that architectural plans for a new junior high school and a primary school did not include sprinklers. Local fire codes require all commercial buildings of 8,000 square feet or more to be equipped with sprinklers wired directly to the Orland Park Police Department's emergency number.

The local fire code, however, does not apply to public schools. Public schools fall under the Illinois State Board of Education's building code, which does not require sprinklers.

Public schools became subject to the state school board's building guidelines to improve fire safety following the 1958 Our Lady of the Angels fire in Chicago, which took the lives of 92 Catholic school children.

At the time, those school construction guidelines were considered much tougher than those for commercial buildings, but fire department officials throughout the state claim they have become outdated.

Specifically, fire officials contend that fire sprinkler technology has improved dramatically over the past 30 years, often citing a statistic that no life has ever been lost in a building equipped with a sprinkler system in working order.

The state fire marshal's office and the Illinois fire chiefs association, among others, will lobby the Illinois General Assembly this spring to alter the school building code to mandate fire sprinklers in all public school buildings.

In Orland, Buhs and Lia campaigned for a referendum that would allow residents to approve a tax increase to pay for the installation of sprinklers in school buildings.

A similar successful referendum campaign was waged about 10 years ago by the fire department in Bolingbrook, one of the few municipalities in Illinois that has retrofitted all of its school buildings with sprinklers.

According to opponents of the measure, heavy electioneering on the part of Bolingbrook firemen played a key role in the success of that campaign.

Some skeptics suggest that the Orland school board linked the sprinkler issue directly to the construction referendum in order to generate support for the tax issue that might not otherwise have been there.

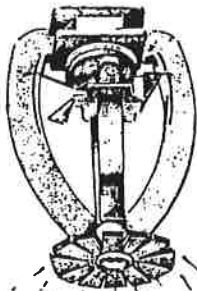
In addition, there are some fears on the part of fire department personnel that a defeat will be looked upon as a vote against putting sprinklers in the schools, rather than opposition to the new school buildings.

A separate referendum on retrofitting school buildings with sprinklers would have been the fairest way to test public sentiment on the issue.

But the fact that the Orland school board even agreed to put the question on the ballot is a major step forward. In most school districts in the state, the fire safety issue isn't even being debated.

Several state legislators have vowed to take up the cause in the General Assembly and that is where the battle should ultimately be waged to ensure that all public school children in Illi-

WHY NOT THE SCHOOLS?



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