



Phil Kadner

Sprinkler law and fire codes have loopholes

The plaque on my office wall from the Orland Fire Protection District states, "For informing and educating the public on the life safety issue of sprinklers in our schools."

The inscription claims my columns were "the conduit by which the people reacted to save our schools and the lives of our children."

I am proud of the role I played in getting a state law approved requiring fire sprinklers in new school buildings and older schools that undergo substantial remodeling.

But the fact is I didn't do much.

I simply pointed out that firefighters in this state had tried unsuccessfully for years to get a law approved requiring sprinklers in public school buildings. Buildings with sprinklers were safer than those without them, the fire experts said.

School officials opposed the idea as being too costly.

Legislators weighed the need to protect the lives of children against the additional cost to taxpayers and decided — since they wouldn't be held accountable for the additional expense anyway — to protect the lives of children.

But in approving the new law, its original intent was severely compromised.

For example, there was no requirement to install sprinklers in existing school buildings that weren't remodeled.

That exclusion means hundreds of old buildings, the ones most vulnerable to fire, do not have sprinklers.

Some day, if there is a fire in such a building and children are killed, people will act shocked and demand action. That will be too late.

There are other, less glaring, loopholes in the law as well. For example, fire inspectors

In Lemont, a school superintendent complained to Southtown education reporter Annie Sweeney that a school addition built by his community has been unable to open for a year because the sprinklers are not operational.

"He's been unable to open the school for a year because he's refused to pay a plumber to come out and connect the sprinkler system in the school to the water main across the street," Lemont Fire Chief T.K. Droogan said.

"And before that he was paying a lawyer to take us to court, arguing that he didn't have the money needed to make the system operational.

"If he had used the time, energy and money he used suing us to find a way to sprinkle his school building, the addition would have been open."

Instead of doing battle over this issue, school and fire officials should have joined forces years ago.

But school superintendents and the Illinois Association of School Boards have been more successful at alienating people than bringing them together, which is one of the reasons Illinois continues to underfund its public schools.

For example, in Orland Park, firefighters offered to campaign for a tax increase to retrofit all of that village's school buildings with sprinklers.

But the school district did nothing to encourage such support. In fact, it was the opposition of that school administration that led Orland fire officials to launch the campaign that resulted in the state sprinkler law.

When Gov. Jim Edgar signed the sprinkler law, he said most people thought public school buildings throughout this state were already covered by the state's fire code.

That was a logical assumption to make. After all, why should a warehouse or office building be held to a higher safety standard than a building that houses children?

I understand the pressure educators feel to make ends meet financially.

But they shouldn't try to sacrifice safety to balance a budget.

The law requiring sprinklers in public