

# Practical Safety & Security

## Teacher's Guide to Classroom Safety

### INTRODUCTION

One primary goal for schools is to provide a safe learning environment for students and a safe workplace for teachers. Many times, the difference between a tragedy and a normal school day depends on how teachers address safety in their own classrooms. This publication outlines some basic steps that teachers can take to help ensure safety for themselves and their students.

### CONTROLS

#### **Weapons of Opportunity:**

Every school works hard to keep weapons out of the classroom but we often find that teachers unwittingly provide the very weapons you work so hard to exclude! Common items such as sharp scissors, letter openers, and paper weights left out on a desk can quickly become weapons during an argument. Storing these items out of site, but still accessible is a simple and prudent prevention measure. Science and vocational teachers should also exercise caution with sharp instruments and tools. Make sure that these are safely stored and returned at the end of each class.

#### **Cleaners and Chemicals:**

Most household cleaners are relatively non-hazardous but extra caution is needed in the classroom, especially for elementary levels. Teachers should avoid bringing cleaners and chemicals into the classroom and should rely on the school to provide these items. Schools can purchase non-hazardous cleaners and must ensure that they are properly labeled and have current material safety data sheets (MSDS) as required by federal safety laws.



#### **Electrical Safety – Extension Cords:**

Many fires result from improper use of extension cords. Here are some tips to help avoid problems:

- Extension cord use should be limited to an immediate need such as powering a projector. After use, the extension cord should be removed and properly stored.
- Use only commercial grade extension cords provided by building services. Cords must have a grounding prong plug. Two wire light duty cords found in most homes are not appropriate for school use.
- Extension cords should not be used for long periods in place of adequate outlets.
- Never run extension cords over ceiling grids, under rugs or hang them from nails or staples. This can cause damage to the insulation resulting in a short circuit.
- Avoid using multi-tap outlets and excessive power strips that can overload the circuit creating a fire potential.
- Inspect cords prior to use and before placing in storage. Check to be sure that the insulation is in good condition and that the grounding prong has not been removed or damaged. Return damaged cords to building services for repair or disposal.

#### **Appliances & Other Hazards:**

Decorative holiday lights, personal appliances and portable heaters are additional areas of concern. Schools should not permit light duty household decorative lights in the school. We often find these strung from ceiling tile grids, thumb tacked to bulletin boards or suspended across a room. Damaged insulation and excessive stress on wires can cause electric faults and fires.

Personal appliances such as coffee makers and microwave ovens can cause serious injuries to students when hot liquids are spilled or handled. We recommend that appliances be limited to teacher lounge areas where student access can be controlled.

Portable heaters are a special concern. Most of these are designed for occasional use in small residential spaces and are not appropriate for constant operation in large classrooms. We often find combustible materials in close proximity to the heaters and heaters used under desks and tables. When operating, these heaters draw excessive current from the building's electrical system.

If your school elects to permit appliances and portable heaters, while not desirable, the following safeguards may help limit your exposure to loss:

- Use only UL listed appliances.
- The school building services should provide appliances so they can maintain control on quality.
- Unplug appliances when not in use and each night before leaving the school.
- Building services should regularly inspect appliances for cord damage and operating condition.
- Maintain at least 30" of clear space between any heating appliance and combustibles such as paper or wood.
- Use appliances in areas where students will not have access.

### **Classroom Decorations:**

Personalizing classrooms is a long time tradition in most schools, but maintaining a safe learning environment should not be compromised. Paper decorations and student artwork should be limited to 20% or less of the wall area and should never cover exit signs or exit doorways. Use flame retardant decorations whenever possible.

Decorations and plants should not be suspended from the ceiling or ceiling tile grid. In some cases these may fall during an emergency and delay exit access. Equally important, students and staff often climb on chairs and tables creating a serious fall exposure. Decorations and plants should be mounted within reach of the floor for easy and safe access. Never hang anything from fire sprinkler heads!

### **Teacher Personal Safety:**

Staff often wear identification badges from neck lanyards. If this is the practice at your school make sure that everyone has a breakaway safety lanyard. This type of lanyard has a Velcro strip or plastic clasp that will break open if the lanyard is caught or pulled avoiding the potential for strangulation.

Locking classroom doors during class and when working alone in the classroom is an easy way to improve safety for students and teachers. We recommend that all schools make this a standard practice.

Another area of safety improvement is ensuring that classrooms can be observed from the hallway. Most classroom doors have windows for this purpose, but we often find that teachers cover the windows for privacy. This increases the teacher's exposure to danger since no one can see if they are in trouble in the classroom. Covered windows may also support allegations of sexual misconduct, especially when teachers work alone with students.

### **Storage and Housekeeping:**

Teachers teach students how to care for the school and the best education is how the classroom is maintained. Excessive clutter, haphazard storage, boxes piled on boxes and overflowing shelves are a poor lesson plan. Taking time for some basic housekeeping can pay dividends in the long term. Not only is a well organized and neat classroom conducive to learning but it can improve safety as well:

- Avoid storing materials on top of cabinets and shelves where it could fall and cause injury.
- Store heavy items on lower shelves, preferably below waist level.

- A clear space of at least 18" must be maintained between storage and fire sprinkler heads.
- Maintain at least 24" of clear space between storage and the ceiling.
- Televisions should be secured to AV carts or sturdy shelves to prevent falling.
- Keep seating neat and maintain clear access to exits.

### **Emergency Response & Security:**

Every school has an emergency response plan and teachers are a critical control point. Take time before an emergency to review roles and responsibilities. Teachers should participate on planning teams and in emergency response exercises. Each classroom should have a "Go-Kit" with important information and equipment such as a current class roster, evacuation diagram, flashlight and a copy of the emergency response plan.

One very effective way to help prevent violence is for teachers to monitor the hallways and check restrooms during class change. While surveillance cameras can record a problem, a teachers presence and prompt intervention can prevent the escalation of a minor incident. This is also an excellent opportunity to improve communication between students and staff.

### **CONCLUSION**

These suggestions reflect just a few issues schools need to consider when managing their safer schools controls. Our Loss Prevention specialists can help schools identify classroom safety and security risks and provide a solid planning base for future improvements. We can also assist with in-service meetings and training topics. Our Loss Prevention services are provided to our policyholders at no charge\*. If you would like assistance with school safety please contact your agent or Loss Prevention specialist.

\* Service product availability may be limited by the coverage in force and available staff resources.

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