FACT SHEET

BUILDING AND LIFE SAFETY ISSUES FOR SAFELY REOPENING SCHOOLS

School officials are facing many challenges as they prepare for reopening schools. While much uncertainty remains, as states plan for the possibility of schools for grades K-12 reopening, schools and local officials must work together to adhere to public health guidelines and other modifications required in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, providing adequate levels of fire and life safety is critical. While meeting these varied needs might prove challenging, this fact sheet provides some tips for helping to maintain fire protection and life safety, enabling students, teachers, and other staff members to return to school under the safest conditions possible.

FIRE PROTECTION SYSTEMS AND LIFE SAFETY SYSTEMS

Many schools have been closed for months; therefore, a review and inspection of the fire protection systems must be performed prior to reoccupying them. NFPA's Fire and Life Safety Checklist for Reopening a Building reviews factors that should be considered to help ensure the proper performance of fire protection and life safety systems prior to reopening any building. The checklist can be applied to schools of all sizes.

EVACUATIONS AND DRILLS

Because students have spent an extended amount of time away from the school building, and with modifications to the way schools plan to operate, it is more important than ever that emergency egress drills be conducted as prescribed. Schools might be asked to find ways to accommodate social distancing during emergency evacuation drills, so it is imperative that all drills be conducted in cooperation with the local AHJ. Details for holding drills, including the required number and frequency of drills, are addressed in NFPA *101®, Life Safety Code®*.

BUILDING MODIFICATIONS

Egress Management

The ways in which occupants typically enter and exit school buildings as well as how they travel within them might need to be modified. When this occurs, a qualified person must review any changes to the way occupants move in the building to ensure that the proper means of egress are provided. The new arrangement needs to be reviewed for compliance with travel distance, number of exits, size of exit, separation of exits, and other egress design criteria.

Doors

Many schools are considering ways to hold doors open to limit the need for students and staff members to open doors with their hands. NFPA *101* recognizes the use of compliant hold-open devices as a safe way to accomplish this as necessary. However, close attention needs to be paid to ensure that the design, function, and operation of such doors fully comply with code requirements.

Change of Use

If directed to create additional classroom space, a qualified person must review the design to ensure that proper fire protection and life safety are provided. This includes reviewing features such as adequate means of egress, appropriate door hardware, adequate fire alarm notification devices, and proper sprinkler coverage. Additionally, any change in the combustible load (storage, furniture, etc.) of a building must be reviewed to ensure that the sprinkler system, if provided, is designed for that fuel load.

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Seating Arrangements

Seating and desk arrangements can be modified to provide adequate spacing between students. When rearranging seating, chairs and tables must not be moved to obstruct or block the required egress paths, including secondary access doors and rescue windows, exits, access to manual fire alarm pull stations, and access to other fire protection and life safety systems.

Use of Partitions in the Classroom

If partitions are added to provide separation between occupants in a classroom, the materials must meet the flame spread ratings and smoke-developed index specified by the applicable interior finish provision of NFPA *101*. Also, a qualified person must evaluate the impact of the partitions on the performance of smoke/heat detection or automatic sprinkler systems to ensure that their design and installation do not render the systems noncompliant and, therefore, ineffective.

FLAMMABLE AND COMBUSTIBLE LIQUIDS

Hand Sanitizer Placement

Additional hand sanitizing dispensers are likely to be needed throughout schools to meet health protocols. Officials should specifically reference NFPA *101* regarding the safe placement of alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) dispensers. Whether free-standing or mounted, dispensers must be reviewed based on their location, characteristics, and the distance between dispensers. In schools, ABHR dispensers can only be installed in rooms or spaces separated from corridors, unless they are otherwise approved by the local AHJ.

Product Storage

Hand sanitizer and other cleaning products classified as flammable and combustible liquids present fire safety concerns, especially when they are stored or used in bulk quantities. Storage of large quantities of flammable and combustible liquids might compromise safety if the fire protection systems are not designed to protect the storage of such quantities of flammable liquids. For the storage of more than five gallons of any alcohol-based hand sanitizer, NFPA 30, *Flammable and Combustible Liquids Code*, should be used.

Learn More

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, NFPA continues to provide key resources and information addressing emergency planning, building, and fire and life safety issues. New resources are being added as the crisis evolves and challenges emerge.

- Visit nfpa.org/coronavirus to access the latest NFPA resources.
- Access free digital access to NFPA *101* at: nfpa.org/101.
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website for the latest federal guidance for K-12 schools, including a readiness and planning toolkit.