



Wisconsin Chapter Report
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School Challenges on 2 Levels
Education & Prevention

Schools are where we send our children to learn the academic skills and social skills to help them make a better life for themselves. So often we see schools neglect one major portion of education which is Life Safety Education. In the writing of this article at the conclusion of Fire Prevention Week, we see that, for so many of us, this has turned into Fire Prevention Weeks or Month. I find it interesting that at this special time we constantly get calls from schools and educational institutions wanting the fire department to come out and do a fire safety lecture during Fire Prevention Week. At this time they want a fire truck to show the kids along with a BRIEF fire safety talk. How often have we all tried to get other Life Safety Educational programs presented? There are a wide variety of programs, ranging from Risk Watch, to many excellent home grown programs, and the constant answer we get is, "We don't have the time too many state mandates, we can't fit you into our schedule". But then, on the other hand, fire departments are to stop and fit the schools into their schedules. Yes, we accommodate them because we know the importance of our message and we will take any opportunity that is given us.

Life Safety Education for our children must not just be one week of the year. As the term Life Safety implies, it is a life time behavioral change for their protection. This is the constant challenge we all undertake. The constant messages of install and maintain your smoke alarms and practice your escape plan are behavioral changes that will make an extraordinary difference. We must never lose our focus or drive to achieve the goal of educating our children. Time and time again we find that when our children embrace these messages they take them back home and talk about what they have learned. How many times have we heard the reports of a child that has gone through Life Safety Education program and subsequently implemented these skills to save the lives of their family? These are the reports that reinforce that our programs do make a difference. This education works by providing children with a good fire safety attitude and properly training them how to act when there is a fire situation. It's what saves lives.

The second challenge we face with schools is keeping our children safe while at school. We do routine fire prevention inspections, looking at all the life safety features of the building and, yes, the artwork on the walls. The fight on enforcing NFPA 1's 20% rule has become a never ending battle. Why was the 20% rule enacted? When you have more than 20% of combustible material on the wall, what does that do? It accelerates the fire and smoke spread throughout the building making an untenable environment for the occupants to escape. Unintentional or intentional, the fire progress very rapidly, fuelled by these combustible materials. Historically we have learned the tragic outcome of these types of fires is larger life loss. We hear the constant rebuttal, "But we need to show the parents and grandparents how creative their children are. We need to display them for a bright and cheery atmosphere." We all understand that. I, myself, love to look at students' artwork, but the paramount issue is their safety and this must prevail. Once again we all become educators, because we are educating the school staff about a hazardous practice. There are many schools that embrace this and become great allies in helping us enforce this. Then there are other schools that ignore the code and

question our authority in enforcing it. This just shows their ignorance in not protecting their students.

It is not just art work on the walls that endangers our children, it is the attitude of running realistic fire drills. We see a trend for schools just to go through the motions of a fire drill. They run them during basically the same time of the day, notifying the staff and running a routine drill. They do not foresee the complexity of a true fire emergency and the difficulty of getting all of the students and staff out safely. When do you plan a fire? How do you know when an emergency will happen and you need to evacuate the facility? Again, these types of attitudes and practices put the students and staff at risk. I have encouraged schools to run unannounced drills, but the response I have gotten is "We can't do that because of the fear of a Columbine type of attack" I'm unsure if it is just a copout for not wanting to run an unannounced drill, or their fear of a poor drill. Again, there are many schools that will run unannounced drills and block exits so that the participants can learn to adapt and get out safely. I commend these schools for their forethought and diligence in executing drills that will improve the safety of their students and staff.

The majority of the time we are targeting the elementary schools, but again we have heard about the tragic life loss within colleges. In trying to run college safety programs, we get the same answers as before, "No time available." So we have been adaptive. We distribute the informational brochures at graduation ceremony; we run it on a weeknight at the fire house; but still, unfortunately, the numbers are low. College students do become complacent to the fire alarm because of so many false alarms. "Why should I evacuate? It is probably just another false alarm." Then, all of a sudden, there is smoke and fire and their delay in acting puts them in danger. These types of situations can be prevented through thorough Life Safety Education. Lately, there has been a flurry of e-mails on e-parade of in regards to loft beds in dorms. Even in a sprinklered building the beds cause an obstruction, as well as increased fuel load. We constantly need to be adaptive in looking at all situations in order to make sure all students are safe. The information exchange for e-parade has been of great value to its participants.

In summary, a single word is used to describe all types and levels of "schools." However the complexity schools present in different venues causes great frustration. The Life Safety Education and facilities protection of our children is a constant struggle that we will continue to work to overcome.

As you read this article, Wisconsin Fire Inspectors Association has just concluded its 2nd annual combined conference. for Life Safety Educators, JFS, and code enforcement officials. This year we have had the honor of having OZZIE be one of our keynote speakers, I know the dynamics of his presentation will energize our members. The conference committee has crafted an expanded and diverse conference this year. My compliments to each one of them for their long hours and hard work.

Yes, I do need to mention the status of Wisconsin's Fire Prevention Code and Building Code package which is currently stalled in legislative committee. The builders have rallied and put forth a lot of pressure on the legislators to increase the current IBC multi-family sprinkler threshold. The other part of this is that rumors of political pressure and promises of campaign contributions is somewhat disturbing. This is an example of backroom politics. We are trying to achieve a safer Wisconsin and they are only looking at business dealings and economics and not the Life Safety. As the builders and legislators move forward to raise this threshold, each one of them need to be cognitive of the fact that they may be a party to the next multi-family fire fatality. As with each and every one of you, the passion and drive that we have to protect our

communities frustrates us when we know that this code would enhance their protection. Unfortunately, politics and business have side tracked this issue.

Education always is an underlying theme in everything we do. Public Educators try to deliver Life Safety skill to our communities through numerous programs. Education is part of enforcement. They ask, "Why do I need to do this? Why does the code say that?" This makes it an educational challenge to achieve compliance. Education never stops; it is dynamic; and it is ever changing. You change your presentation to meet the current audience; you become adaptive in order to achieve your goal. I hope that we all never lose our passion and drive in order to challenge ourselves to overcome the obstacles in educating our communities. Have a safe holiday season.

Respectfully submitted,

Tod Doebler
Wisconsin State Chapter President