

South Carolina Office of State Fire Marshal

SOUTH CAROLINA STATE FIRE

Preventing and Responding to Acts of Violence and Fires in Schools

The intent of this document is to provide guidance to fire code officials and school district employees whose responsibilities are to prevent, prepare for, and respond to all types of emergencies in schools. Though not to be construed as an all-inclusive list for educational occupancies, the relevant requirements listed below provide guidance on overall building safety as required by the S.C. Code of Laws and S.C. Code of Regulations. **The best response begins with effective planning.**

Emergency Planning and Preparedness

The following requirements of the S.C. Fire Code describe what must be included in emergency plans.

Lockdown Plans:

- **§ 404.2.3.1 Lockdown plan contents.** Lockdown plans shall be approved by the fire code official and shall include the following:
 1. Initiation. The plan shall include instructions for reporting an emergency that requires a lockdown.
 2. Accountability. The plan shall include accountability procedures for staff to report the presence or absence of occupants.
 3. Recall. The plan shall include a prearranged signal for returning to normal activity.
 4. Communication and coordination. The plan shall include an approved means of two-way communication between a central location and each secured area.
- **§ 404.2.3.2 Training frequency.** The training frequency shall be included in the lockdown plan. The lockdown drills shall not substitute for any of the fire and evacuation drills required in Section 405.2.
- **§ 404.2.3.3 Lockdown notification.** The method of notifying building occupants of a lockdown shall be included in the plan. The method of notification shall be separate and distinct from the fire alarm signal.
- **§ 406.4 Emergency lockdown training.** Where a facility has a lockdown plan, employees shall be trained on their assigned duties and procedures in the event of an emergency lockdown.
- **§ 406.2 Frequency.** Employees shall receive training in the contents of fire safety and evacuation plans and their duties as part of new employee orientation and not less than annually thereafter. Records of training shall be maintained.

Fire Evacuation Drills:

- **§ 405.2** Requires monthly fire and evacuation drills be conducted for all occupants of a Group E (Educational) occupancy.
- **§ 403.5.1 First emergency evacuation drill.** The first emergency evacuation drill of each school year shall be conducted within 10 days of the beginning of classes.
- **§ 403.5.2 Time of day.** Emergency evacuation drills shall be conducted at different hours of the day or evening, during the changing of classes, when the school is at assembly, during the recess or gymnastic periods, or during other times to avoid distinction between drills and actual fires.



South Carolina Office of State Fire Marshal

SOUTH CAROLINA STATE FIRE

- **§ 403.5.3 Assembly points.** Outdoor assembly areas shall be designated and shall be located a safe distance from the building being evacuated so as to avoid interference with fire department operations. The assembly areas shall be arranged to keep each class separate to provide accountability of all individuals.
- **§ 406.3.2 Evacuation training.** Employees shall be familiarized with the fire alarm and evacuation signals, their assigned duties in the event of an alarm or emergency, evacuation routes, areas of refuge, exterior assembly areas and procedures for evacuation.
- **§ 401.3.3 Delayed notification.** A person shall not, by verbal or written directive, require any delay in the reporting of a fire to the fire department.

Additionally, the following State law requires fire drills in schools:

- **59-63-910 Fire Drills in Schools.** All teachers or superintendents in charge of the schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by taxation shall conduct fire drills at least once each month. Any teacher or superintendent failing to observe the provisions of this section shall be fined not less than ten dollars nor more than twenty-five dollars for each offense. Such fine shall be deducted from his salary and turned over to the county treasurer for ordinary county purposes.

Practicing fire drills is essential in effective response to fire alarms during a real life emergency. Drills should be scheduled by school administration. However, the exact date and time of the drill should remain a secret until the moment before the drill is to occur. Announcing a fire drill schedule months in advance will allow for the potential for the scheduled drill to be used to do harm. Instead, school administration should keep drills scheduled for random times, and make a “this is a drill” announcement to school occupants only moments before the drill is to be conducted.

To check for hazards, classroom teachers should be the first to enter a hallway. These hazards may include smoke or fire, or it may be a school intruder intending to do harm. Classroom teachers should be prepared to make decisions based on situational awareness. The following questions are just as important during a school fire as they are in the event of an intruder: Do we leave? Or, do we stay and shelter in place in the classroom? If we cannot escape, what is Plan B? Are there windows or an alternative escape route? Do I have a way to let officials know if we cannot escape?

Fire Alarms

Fire Alarms have long been a staple of fire safety in public buildings. They provide early detection of a potential fire as well as notification to building occupants of the need to evacuate from potential harm. While the fire alarm may be used by a school intruder to inflict harm on persons as a part of a mass casualty incident, removing fire alarms or altering how we respond to fire alarms in buildings is not the best solution. Delayed evacuation or sheltering in place may have deadly consequences in the event of a rapidly growing fire.

Additionally, the public may grow complacent and become confused when a fire alarm sounds in other buildings or at home. If the public is conditioned to ignore a fire alarm signal until told to evacuate by someone in authority, then there is no advantage in having early detection and notification of the fire alarm. Removing fire alarms from public buildings ignores the countless numbers of lives saved from fires by this effective and reliable technology.



South Carolina Office of State Fire Marshal

SOUTH CAROLINA STATE FIRE

Instead, school staff must be aware any fire alarm activation (every time it sounds) has the potential to be the result of a catastrophic event. The school could be on fire and the staff person must know how to react if he or she encounters smoke or flames in the egress path. There could be an intentional act to cause harm and the staff person must know how to react when he or she encounters an intruder in the egress path. Prevention is the best answer in these cases. When prevention fails, having plans and situational awareness will be the best way to survive.

The code allows for some options for alternate methods to initiate and affect an evacuation. However, these alternate methods require the evaluation of the facility by a design professional and approval of the *fire code official* and, in some cases, the local fire department.

Some exceptions for fire alarms include:

- **§ 907.2.3 Group E. Exception 3.** Manual fire alarm boxes are not required in Group E occupancies where all of the following apply:
 - 3.1. Interior *corridors* are protected by smoke detectors.
 - 3.2. Auditoriums, cafeterias, gymnasiums and similar areas are protected by *heat detectors* or other *approved* detection devices.
 - 3.3. Shops and laboratories involving dusts or vapors are protected by *heat detectors* or other *approved* detection devices.
- **§ 907.2.3 Group E. Exception 4.** Manual fire alarm boxes shall not be required in Group E occupancies where all of the following apply:
 - 4.1. The building is equipped throughout with an *approved automatic sprinkler system* installed in accordance with Section 903.3.1.1.
 - 4.2. The emergency voice/alarm communication system will activate on sprinkler water flow.
 - 4.3. Manual activation is provided from a normally occupied location.

Classroom and Egress Doors

Classroom and egress doors shall comply with the requirements of Chapter 10, of the 2015 IFC, as applicable. Specifically, this requires all egress doors be readily openable from the egress side with a single operation, and without the use of a key, special knowledge, or effort. The use of classroom door security and barricade devices do not comply with this requirement and are prohibited.

- **§ 1031.2.1 Security devices and egress locks.** Security devices affecting means of egress shall be subject to approval of the fire code official. Security devices and locking arrangements in the means of egress that restrict, control, or delay egress shall be installed and maintained as required by this chapter.
- **§ 1010.1.9 Door operations.** Except as specifically permitted by Section 1010.1.9, egress doors shall be readily openable from the egress side without the use of a key or special knowledge or effort.
- **§ 1010.1.9.4 Bolt locks.** Manually operated flush bolts or surface bolts are not permitted.
- **§ 1010.1.9.5 Unlatching.** Except as specifically permitted by Section 1010.1.9, the unlatching of any door or leaf shall not require more than one operation.
- **§ 703.2 Opening protectives.** Opening protectives shall be maintained in an operative condition in accordance with NFPA 80. Fire doors and smoke barrier doors shall not be blocked or obstructed, or otherwise made inoperable.



South Carolina Office of State Fire Marshal

SOUTH CAROLINA STATE FIRE

The use of a barricade device is not proven to provide any added benefit. Instead, it creates a more dangerous situation for classroom occupants. The use of magnets to prevent doors from latching is an issue of convenience rather than security. Neither device is compliant with any of the applicable fire or building codes. The best policy is to ensure classroom doors are provided with single action locks and to keep the doors closed and locked at all times during school operation. Doors may prevent entering anytime; however, they cannot restrict exiting.

Fire Apparatus Access Roads

Schools are required to maintain access for emergency vehicles to all sides of the buildings at all times. Obstructions may cause delays in needed assistance.

- **§ 503.4 Obstruction of fire apparatus access roads.** Fire apparatus access roads shall not be obstructed in any manner, including the parking of vehicles. The minimum widths and clearances established in Sections 503.2.1 and 503.2.2 shall be maintained at all times (minimum 20' wide and 13'6" overhead clearance).

Prevention is the best defense. Emergency planning and preparedness are crucial for successful mitigation when prevention fails to provide the answer. Prevention, planning, and preparedness have worked for decades to prevent fires in schools from becoming catastrophic. If everyone applies the same principles to preventing and responding to intruders, it will make an immeasurable difference.

For more information on code compliance and fire and life safety in buildings, please contact SC State Fire, Office of State Fire Marshal.

