

Preventing and Responding to Acts of Violence and Fire in Schools

The Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Office is committed to ensuring the safety of students and teachers and works diligently throughout the year to ensure that local schools are safe. Security and fire safety are not mutually exclusive. The State Fire Marshal wants parents, educators and students to know that Tennessee schools can have the highest security standards *and* meet fire code safety requirements at the same time, and we are ready to help you make your school as safe as possible.

Safe schools start with effective comprehensive planning. We highly encourage any school that is considering changes to its exits or classroom doors or removing fire alarm pull stations to contact the State Fire Marshal's Office prior to performing any work. Depending on the project, architectural plans may be required; please reach out to Codes Enforcement before beginning any work. For any questions about code compliance and fire and life safety in schools, please contact 615-741-7190.

Door Hardware

National standards and third party testing by accredited laboratories are critical for ensuring that security and safety products used by schools will perform as advertised. There are many products available on the Internet that claim to increase security, but they are often not tested by a nationally recognized laboratory and frequently present other challenges under fire codes and ADA requirements. Products that have not been tested to national safety standards provide no assurance that they will work properly when needed. The State Fire Marshal does not endorse the use of these products.

Fortunately, door hardware products are readily available that meet all of the security and fire safety needs of your school. The Builders Hardware Manufacturers Association (BHMA) develops and maintains performance standards for strength, operation and security for door hardware. There are three grade levels: Grades 1 (highest level), 2 and 3. **Installing tested and proven hardware that meets a school's security needs is the best way to ensure a door will perform properly in an emergency.**

The International Fire Code, NFPA 101 Life Safety Code, and accessibility laws of Tennessee all have specific requirements for school classroom doors. They are:

1. Doors must be readily openable from the egress side without the use of a key or special knowledge or effort.
2. Doors shall not require tight grasping, tight pinching or twisting of the wrist to operate.
3. Door handles, pulls, latches, locks and other operating devices shall be installed 34 inches minimum and 48 inches maximum above the finished floor.
4. Manually operated flush bolts or surface bolts are not permitted.
5. The unlatching of any door or leaf shall not require more than one operation.

It's important 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.

A state registered architect or your local door hardware provider will likely be able to help you find the best product for your school.

Fire Alarms

Fire alarms have long been an indispensable tool of fire safety; they provide early detection of potential fire and notification to evacuate. While a bad actor may use fire alarms to create confusion, disabling fire alarms, discontinuing fire drills or altering our response to fire alarms in buildings is not a safe solution.

Our office has received numerous questions regarding the removal or relocation of manual fire alarm boxes. It's important to note that the Code allows for the elimination of manual fire alarm boxes with certain provisions. They are:

Option 1: Schools without a fire sprinkler system

Manual fire alarm boxes may be eliminated where all of the following conditions apply:

- (1) Interior corridors are protected by smoke detectors using an alarm verification system as described in NFPA 72, National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code.
- (2) Auditoriums, cafeterias, and gymnasiums are protected by heat-detection devices or other approved detection devices.
- (3) Shops and laboratories involving dusts or vapors are protected by heat-detection devices or other approved detection devices.
- (4) Provision is made at a central point to manually activate the evacuation signal or to evacuate only affected areas.

Option 2: Schools with a fire sprinkler system

Manual fire alarm boxes shall not be required in schools where the building is equipped throughout with an approved automatic sprinkler system. The fire alarm or voice evacuation system must activate if a sprinkler head operates. Also, a means to manually activate the fire alarm must exist at a central point which is typically the front office.

Fire Evacuation Drills

Fire drills provide an opportunity for teachers and students to practice evacuation to be better prepared during a real fire emergency. Drills should be scheduled by the school administration; however, drills should be held at both announced and unannounced times to simulate the unusual conditions that can occur during emergency situation. For unannounced fire drills, school administrators could make a "this is a drill" announcement moments before the drill to alleviate concerns regarding a false alarm or a bad actor. Please see Tenn. Code Ann. § 68-102-137 for requirements governing fire drills.

**If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the
Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Codes Enforcement Section at 615-741-7190.**

