

Hornell City School District

Summary of

NYS Fire Safety

Regulations

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INTRODUCTION

The NYS Uniform Fire and Building Code (hereafter known as the CODE) was adopted as state law in 1984. It consists of a set of regulations meant to improve and maintain a minimum standard of life safety for NYS citizens with regards to the buildings that they live and work in. School buildings are NOT exempt from following the rules of the CODE. The State Education Department expands upon the requirements of the CODE in its publication, "The Manual of Planning Standards."

The purpose of this document is to excerpt and simplify the sections of the CODE so that they are comprehensible to District employees. With this document in hand, an employee will be able to quickly understand what his or her responsibility is in their work space (and their building) in order to stay in compliance with CODE regulations.

The CODE can be stringent and may sometimes conflict with desirable educational goals and environments. The CODE is NYS Law and it directs that life safety requirements take precedence over any other perceived needs. School buildings are public buildings. These rules govern their use and assure that the community members that use them are as safe as possible.

In the final analysis, only a NYS-certified inspector can determine the intent and meaning of a particular CODE regulation in a particular instance..... not a teacher, not a principal, not a Union Representative, not a Superintendent, and not the Board of Education. While the CODE officers' judgments may sometimes appear to be arbitrary, decisions have to be made and the certified inspector is the individual authorized under the Law to make them. An explanation of a CODE official's decision is always available; please call the Maintenance Department at 324-3700.

RESCUE WINDOWS

With some exceptions, every classroom has a designated emergency escape window known as a rescue window. Under the CODE, this window has special status because it is considered to be a secondary exit from the building. Exits under the CODE are very well regulated.

Therefore, this window is to be kept clear and unobstructed at all times. Do not place any objects directly in front of the window – no table, chairs, desks, boxes, equipment, etc. No objects should be placed on the window shelf.

Do not place decorative materials, stickers, curtains, or paint on or above the rescue window shelf – no paper, cardboard, stickers, cellophane, etc. Even if the curtains have been treated with a flame retardant, they cannot be placed on a rescue window.

Do not remove or cover the rescue window stickers on the rescue window or on the shade of the rescue window.

Essentially, the rescue window area is to be left unblocked and undecorated. While this may seem aesthetically unpalatable, it ensures that this window will be available to the fire department in an emergency for student rescue from your classroom.

EXTENSION CORDS & ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES

- A) We strongly prefer the use of surge suppressors or power strips. If extension cords are used, then the following rules apply:
- 1) Use only the thick orange one with the round cords that have ASO, ST, SJO, SJT@ stamped on them. The extension cords must have a ground prong at the male ends. **HOUSEHOLD EXTENSION CORDS ARE NOT ALLOWED UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE.**
 - 2) Extension cords are for temporary use only. When finished with the task at hand, they should be disconnected from the wall receptacle. Roll them up and store them where they will not be a tripping hazard.
 - 3) Extension cords cannot be taped to the wall or floor to create permanent wiring situation. Move closer to the receptacle so that one does not require an extension cord.
 - 4) If a cord has a break in the insulation, do not repair with electrical tape. Instead, dispose of the damaged cord and obtain a new, intact cord.
 - 5) Do not string together surge suppressors to create a pseudo-extension cord. Obtain an intact extension cord (for temporary use, of course) or move closer to the receptacle.
- B) Kitchen appliances should be found only in teacher's lounges and not in classrooms. This category includes refrigerators, microwaves, toasters, coffee makers, stoves, hotplates and similar items. Numerous appliances place an excessive electrical load on our existing building electrical systems. We have also discovered severely unsafe situations in several classrooms with regards to appliances. Any appliance with a heating device must be unplugged daily.

A limited number of portable heaters will be allowed. However, these must be rated by Underwriter's Laboratories and must automatically shut their heating coils off when tipped over. Also, keep combustible items at least 3 feet away from all sides of an appliance that contains a heating device.

The CODE **DOES NOT** allow the use of portable space heaters in any classroom.

CURTAINS

Under the CODE, decorative curtains that you hang anywhere in classrooms, hallways and offices are known as draperies and are tightly regulated.

Before you bring a curtain into a school building, it needs to have been treated to be flame-resistant. Area drycleaners perform this treatment.

The inspector needs to see written proof of the successful treatment. Therefore, you must get a receipt. The receipt should show:

- 1) name of the curtain's owner
- 2) the room number where the curtain is displayed
- 3) the school name
- 4) the types (valence, drape, etc.), color(s), and patterns of the curtains

Please make three copies of the receipt. Give one to your principal; send one to Henry Turek at the Maintenance Shop and **KEEP ONE IN YOUR ROOM TROUGHOUT THE YEAR**. The inspector will want to see this proof during the annual inspection.

RUGS AND FURNITURE

The District is required by the State Education Department to provide highly flame-resistant rugs and furniture when it furnishes the interior of a room.

Therefore, if an employee brings in an item from home that does not match the State's stringent standards, then the whole purpose of the SED fire safety regulations are defeated. Since it is technically infeasible to upgrade certain items to those standards, they cannot be allowed.

BEFORE a rug or carpet is purchased by an employee for use in their school space, written proof of its fire resistance rating must be presented to the District Safety and Health Specialist for approval. The same procedure must be followed for furniture such as chairs, sofas, etc. If you have any doubts about what defines rugs or furniture, please call Henry Turek at 324-3700 first, **BEFORE** you spend your hard-earned money.

PAPER - ON WALLS AND DOORS

Perhaps no other fire safety regulation causes as much distress to teachers than this one. Educators are taught to prepare a welcoming and instructive environment for their students. Preparing this environment involves the display of paper instructional materials and artwork on classroom walls, classroom doors and hallway walls.

Nevertheless, a CODE limit to such combustible displays exists. The regulation is explicit. The paper materials and artwork shall cover no more than 20% of the wall surface, must be 2 feet from the ceiling and 10 feet from exits. Note that a classroom door is considered an exit.

Yes, this rule is very strict. If you can visualize how fast a fire can travel down a continuous wall of paper, you will understand why it is so, and if you have covered your classroom door with paper, and it catches on fire, you have essentially lost your primary exit from your classroom.

So, think carefully before you set up your paper displays. Do not place paper on your classroom door. On walls, place your paper "in chunks" so that significant bare spaces exist between the "chunks". Do not place the artwork all the way to the ceiling.

The fire inspectors understand the need to display instructional materials and artwork and are reasonable. They will not bring out their rulers and start measuring surface areas and distances unless they feel that the employee involved is being unresponsive to their concern about fire safety.

EXITS AND EXITWAYS

Exits are the exterior building doors, classroom doors, and rescue windows. Exitways are the aisles, passageways and hallways that get you quickly to those exits in a crisis.

The key message here is: **KEEP EXITS AND EXITWAYS UNBLOCKED AT ALL TIMES.** The well-documented history of fire disasters with multiple fatalities almost always involves blocked, obstructed, hindered or locked exits and exitways.

What does this mean practically?

- 1) Exitways are not a storage area.
- 2) Exitways are not a place for desks and chairs.
- 3) Exitways are not a place for clothing storage.
- 4) Exitways are not a place for large objects that hinder exiting, like Christmas trees, soda machines and paper mache replicas.
- 5) Exits cannot be obstructed by; tables, boxes, etc.

Note that in some of these examples that one is not only blocking exiting, but also placing combustible items in exits another violation.

Before you place an item(s) in an exitway/exit, think of what it would be like to try to escape from a burning, smoke-filled building, with 50 other very panicked individuals, mostly children and your primary exitway is severely hindered or blocked.

ESCAPE PROCEDURES

On the wall of every classroom near the hallway door should be found two (2) items. One is a written description of how you should exit from the building during a fire alarm. The other is a graphical map portraying the same escape route. The inspectors tend to refer to these respectively as the procedures and maps. Please post them over the exit doors from your classroom.

Read them. Know them. Practice them. Think in advance of a secondary escape route if your main escape route were blocked.

Then, please leave them where they are. Do not move them. Do not cover them. Do not write on them. Talk with your head custodian if you have any questions about them.

Remember, you may be able to walk through your fire escape route in your sleep but, how about a substitute teacher or an adult education class at night? The procedures and maps are for the benefit of anyone who may occupy that building at any time.

STORAGE

This rule is simply stated, but has a lot of power behind it, to wit: Storage in classrooms and storerooms is orderly and restricted to items of obvious value and usefulness.

If there is any item in NYS Law that illustrates the power of judgment given to the certified CODE inspector, here we have it!

Orderly, Obvious value, Usefulness, who determines these? The certified inspector does.

The purpose of the regulation is to prevent the build-up of a fire load, or said another way, an accumulation of a lot of combustible items that will make a fire much worse than it might have been otherwise. Also, a cluttered space has the potential to block exitways out of the space. Many of us have inherited the packrat gene. The inspector has the legal obligation to curb the excesses of that gene, for the safety of all the occupants of the space involved.

So, if you get cited on this item, take it as a wake-up call. Most likely the time has arrived for you to initiate a housecleaning session in your space.

HOLIDAY DECORATIONS

When stringing holiday lights about the room, do not string them over door jambs or window openings. The cords can get caught between the door/window and the jamb which causes both a fire and shock hazard.

Live Christmas trees are not allowed in school buildings. Place artificial trees close to an existing outlet. This reduces the likelihood of having to use an extension cord when you string the lights. If you do need to use an extension cord, please see the building custodian. Please do not bring in any household extension cords. These cannot be used in school buildings.

SUMMARY

The NYS Fire Safety Booklet for public school inspections is a listing of approximately 120 codes to be checked. Obviously, we have not covered all of the possible citations in this abbreviated summary. If you have a long career working in the NYS public school system, do not be surprised if you eventually have a personal encounter with one of the more obscure requirements of the CODE.

This pamphlet provides you with information concerning the minimum standards of fire safety in a school building. This District will regularly attempt to go beyond those minimum standards.

Enforcement of the CODE is necessarily intrusive, time-consuming, and costs some money. The alternatives are major property damage, tremendous inconvenience, extremely unpleasant human injuries or, in the worst case, death.

Let us all work together to provide a safe working environment for us and safe learning environment for the citizens of tomorrow. Thank you.