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RESOURCES

[California Building Code, Title 24, Part 2, Chapter 3, Section 305.1](#)

[California Education Code, Chapter 1 - School Safety](#)

[California Fire Code, Title 24, Part 9, Chapter 4, Section 403.4](#)

[California Code of Regulations Title 19, Division 1, Chapter 1, Subchapter 1, Article 3](#)

QUESTIONS

[Email PRISM Risk Control](#)
or call 916.850.7300

Fire and Life Safety Inspections of K12 School Buildings

by Scarlett Sadler

As required by [Health and Safety Code 13146.3](#), fire departments across California must annually perform fire and life safety inspections of Educational Group E occupancies in their jurisdiction. An Educational Group E occupancy includes, among others, the use of a building or structure, or portion thereof, more than six persons at any one time for educational purposes through the 12th grade. Most of PRISM's member school district buildings or structures will fall under the Educational Group E.

Fire and life safety inspections conducted at school districts by the fire department play a crucial role in ensuring compliance with fire safety regulations and protecting the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. A fire and life safety inspection is not just about meeting standards but also about proactively identifying and mitigating potential fire hazards within school facilities. The fire department assess various aspects, such as fire alarm systems, emergency exits, fire extinguishers, and the use of fire-resistant building materials to ensure all items are in proper working condition and meet safety standards.

During the school year, district employees commonly decorate classrooms, corridors, and other communal spaces or relocate and/or remove items throughout the campus. While these activities contribute to the vibrant atmosphere of a school, they can also pose challenges when it comes to adhering to fire regulations and being adequately prepared for a fire and life safety inspection.

Districts can address these concerns by clearly defining the acceptable use of materials and the location of materials on their campuses. In addition, districts can help their school sites prepare for these annual fire and life safety inspections




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by performing regular self-inspections of the campuses. Not only do these self-inspections help school sites be more prepared for a fire and life safety inspection, but these self-inspections are also a good opportunity for the district to ensure regular inspections are being completed in accordance with the inspection cycle, as stated in each district's or school site's Injury and Illness Prevention Program.

Taking note of the following areas when performing a self-inspection can help a district be prepared for fire and life safety inspections and may also address some other areas of concern.

Classrooms and Public Assembly Areas

- Classrooms should have accessible portable fire extinguishers weighing less than 40 lbs., hung no more than 5' off the ground, or, if weighing more than 40 lbs., the fire extinguisher should be hung no more than 3.5' off the ground.
 - Seating arrangements should be conducive to a quick evacuation if needed, and occupant loads over 50 should be clearly posted in the applicable room.
 - Artwork or teaching materials should be limited on the walls of classrooms and should never cover more than 50 % of the wall to which they are attached.
 - Curtains, draperies, fabric hangings, and other similar combustible decorative materials suspended from walls or ceilings should be flame resistant. They should not exceed 10% of the specific wall or ceiling area to which they are attached.
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- A photograph of a classroom with several tables and chairs. The tables are covered with colorful cloths (yellow, red, blue). There are various educational materials and toys on the tables. The walls are decorated with colorful posters and artwork. A large blue banner with the words 'ART WALL' is visible in the background.
- Ceilings and exit doors should be clear of hanging artwork, teaching, and decorative materials. Evacuation maps should be posted near the door, not on the door; this applies to all rooms in which evacuation maps are required.
 - Classroom exits should be clear and accessible with no obstructions, including no use of flammable materials on windows when there is only one exit door.
 - When necessary, exit signs should be illuminated to include in gymnasiums, cafeterias, and multi-purpose rooms. Emergency exit lighting should also be working properly.
- Storage of any item should be >24" below the ceiling in buildings without fire sprinklers or >18" below the sprinkler head in buildings with fire sprinklers.
 - If extension cords or surge protectors are in use, they are not to replace permanent wiring and should be plugged directly into the wall. When the environment could potentially cause wear on the cords, cord protectors should be used.
 - Classrooms should be free of flammable furniture, including couches, bean bags, lounge chairs, and pillows. Furniture with flammable exteriors and interior stuffing should not be permitted. Districts should create a policy regarding personal use of furniture, and all furniture should be approved by district or school site management before entering the classroom.

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Special Use Classrooms (Woodshop/Autoshop/Band etc.)

- Flammable liquids should be stored in an approved flammable liquid cabinet with self-closing doors and no ability for penetration. In addition, if oil and /or paint rags are used, they should be stored in a metal container with a tight-fitted, self-closing lid.
- Dust collection systems, when in use, should be properly maintained, to include periodic inspections, filter cleaning, and ensuring all components are functioning as required.
- Any and all curtains used in band/drama rooms should be made of flame-resistant materials.
- All shut-off valves and switches in classrooms with electrical equipment or gas systems should be clearly marked and accessible.



General Exit Routes

- All exits should be easily accessible and clear of any obstructions, decorations, and flammable materials.
- All doors in areas serving 50 or more people should be equipped with panic hardware.

General Fire Protection

- At least annually or during a scheduled drill, the following systems should be maintained, tested, or inspected for operation as required:
 - Emergency lighting
 - Fire extinguishers
 - Fire alarm system
 - Fire-rated assemblies
- All rooms should be clearly marked as to their purpose to include fire alarm room, electrical room etc.
- All ceiling tiles should be in place, and there should be no unsecured openings into the attic or space above the ceiling.
- All outlets, light switches, and junction boxes should have unbroken cover plates and be completely adhered to prevent any exposed wiring.
- Electrical subpanels should be free from decoration and obstruction. In front of electrical service equipment, a working space of at least 30 inches in width, 36 inches in depth, and 78 inches in height must be provided.
- Commercial kitchen hood extinguishing systems, including those in cafeterias and/or multi-purpose rooms, should be clean and free of grease accumulation. In addition, the hood should be serviced and tagged within the past six months.

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General Observations

- Artwork and teaching materials on corridor walls should be limited to no more than 20 % of the wall area.
- The school address should be posted near the main entrance in a conspicuous location and in contrasting color.
- All fire lanes should be marked, clearly visible, and clear from obstructions.
- If the campus is fenced in, there should be a gate that is sufficient in size to allow for ambulances, police equipment, and/or firefighting apparatus; in addition, if equipped with locks, they should be designed to permit easy access or the keys should be contained in a key box.

Recommendations for conducting regular self-inspections of school campuses should come as no surprise; however, taking into account the items covered above could help a district be more prepared for their next fire and life safety inspection and even address some common hazards that may not be currently considered. For questions regarding fire and life safety inspections, including general inspections or self-inspections, contact [Risk Control](#).