

Ministry of Education

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Date: September 8, 2020

Memorandum To: Directors of Education
Secretary/Treasurers of School Authorities
Private Schools
First Nation Education Partners

From: Denise Dwyer
Assistant Deputy Minister
Indigenous Education and Well-Being Division

Jon Pegg
Ontario Fire Marshal

Subject: Fire Drills in Schools 2020-21

As schools reopen, the safety of students and the staff working in the education system remains a top priority. Therefore, it is critical that when planning for the 2020-2021 school year, procedures for conducting fire drills should be aligned with public health advice. As such, a flexible and balanced approach will be required when undertaking fire drills in schools, including private schools.

We recognize that the overcrowding generally associated with total evacuation fire drills in schools may lead to an increased risk for COVID-19 transmission. The Ontario Fire Marshal is issuing a binding directive, *Fire Marshal Directive 2020-001, Total Evacuation Fire Drills in Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, to assistants to the Fire Marshal. This directive provides flexibility during fire drills so that all occupants of the school do not need to evacuate simultaneously, to ensure COVID-19 physical distancing requirements are maintained. This approach will be deemed to comply with *Fire Code* requirements for schools by local fire departments.

To support school safety, the Ministry of Education and the Office of the Fire Marshal collaborated to create the attached guidance document for Keeping Students Safe in School, during fire drills. The guidance document reflects the content of the *Fire Marshal Directive*, including providing sample modifications for a total evacuation fire drill. School administrators and local fire services are encouraged to work together to consider implementation of additional safe practices to further minimize the risk of COVID-19 spread in school settings.

For First Nation/federally-operated schools, we encourage you to use these as guidance documents to support fire safety in your schools and when planning and updating your policies and procedures. Please also continue to consult with your local fire authorities.

Should you have any questions about the guidance document, please contact Dianne Persaud, Manager, Safe and Healthy Schools Branch at Dianne.Persaud@ontario.ca or your local fire authorities.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Denise Dwyer
Assistant Deputy Minister

Original signed by

Jon Pegg
Ontario Fire Marshal

Attachment

- C. Executive Director, Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE)
Executive Director, Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO)
Executive Director, Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO)
Executive Director, Ontario Principals' Council (OPC)
Jeff Butler, Assistant Deputy Minister, Student Support and Field Services
Andrew Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Labour and Finance Division

Ministry of Education

Keeping Students Safe in School

This document has been drafted in collaboration with the Office of the Fire Marshal and is intended to support school boards when planning for fire drills, in compliance with Fire Code requirements and aligned with public health advice related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Requirements in Section 2.8 of Division B of the Fire Code (Ontario Regulation 213/07, as amended) require that schools and private schools conduct a total evacuation fire drill at least 3 times in each of the fall and spring terms while school is in session, with additional fire drill requirements applying to schools operating in the summer. These fire drill requirements also apply to extended day programs or third-party programs, and to child care centres that are operated in schools and provide services to children that are pupils of a board. In addition, the Fire Code requires fire drill procedures to be prepared in consultation with the Chief Fire Official.

While a “total evacuation fire drill” is not a defined term under the Fire Code, there is a general understanding that during this type of fire drill all building occupants are expected to evacuate simultaneously. As a result, total evacuation fire drills commonly result in the converging of building occupants in hallways, exits, and at designated meeting areas outside of the school building. Therefore, it is critical that when planning for the 2020-2021 school year, procedures for conducting total evacuation fire drills be aligned with physical distancing guidance provided by public health officials. As such, a flexible and balanced approach will be required when undertaking total evacuation fire drills.

DIRECTIVE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE FIRE MARSHAL

On September 4, 2020, the Office of the Fire Marshal issued **Fire Marshal Directive 2020-001, “Total Evacuation Fire Drills in Schools During COVID-19 Pandemic”** to Assistants to the Fire Marshal.

For the 2020/2021 school year, Assistants to the Fire Marshal are directed to deem the following procedures to be compliant with the requirements of total evacuation fire drills as set out in Article 2.8.3.2 of Division B of the Fire Code for schools, private schools,

extended day programs or third-party programs, and to child care centres that are operated in schools and provide services to children that are pupils of a board:

- 1. On the scheduled Fire Drill day, a one-time sounding of the fire alarm during an all-school announcement in order to familiarize all students and staff with the sound of the fire alarm.*
- 2. On the same day, following Item 1, evacuation of individual classrooms in a manner that ensures physical distancing is maintained in accordance with public health guidance. As only a few classrooms may be able to evacuate simultaneously, the total evacuation of the school may extend over the course of the school day. The teacher/supervisory person may use a cell phone ringer, a bell or a similar type of device to commence the individual classroom evacuation, at the scheduled time.*

For clarity, these allowances are only for purposes of undertaking a total evacuation fire drill and only where needed to ensure compliance with public health guidance. Where a fire alarm sounds outside the scope of a planned fire drill, the total evacuation of the school shall proceed as per procedures outlined in the approved school Fire Safety Plan.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SCHOOLS

The Ministry of Education encourages school boards to review and make amendments, as required, to fire drill procedures to allow for compliance with public health measures related to COVID-19, such as physical distancing and masking requirements.

Sample Modifications for a Total Evacuation Fire Drill

On designated “fire drill days” (minimum 3 times for each fall and spring term):

Sounding the Alarm

- A “one-time” sounding of the fire alarm is conducted in the morning, so that students become familiar with the sound of the alarm:
 - Principals may choose to notify staff and local fire services of this procedure the day before the fire alarm will be sounded.
- On the fire drill day, a school announcement can be made on the PA system that outlines how the total evacuation fire drill will be occurring. This may include instructions related to:
 - Staff and student roles
 - Physical distancing
 - Masking
 - Staggered or scheduled evacuation process

Evacuation Procedure:

- The total evacuation of the school will take place per procedures outlined in the approved school Fire Safety Plan. As only a few classrooms may be able to evacuate simultaneously, the scheduling of individual classroom evacuations may be required.
- Individual classrooms will evacuate in a manner that ensures physical distancing and the wearing of masks (as required) is maintained in accordance with public health guidance.
- Teacher plays recording on cell phone or other device to simulate the sound of the fire alarm to commence the individual classroom evacuation, at the scheduled time.
- Teacher practices duties assigned under the Fire Safety Plan (e.g. closing windows and doors).
- Individual classes or cohorts practice evacuation procedures by walking the primary and secondary exit routes, while maintaining physical distancing.
- If the building has more than one exit (e.g. east and west wing), multiple classes may be able to participate simultaneously while adhering to public health advice in common areas, such as hallways.
- Exit paths can be identified using colour coding that can serve as a reminder for primary students, where they need to go.
- Once the class has safely evacuated from the building, students walk to assigned meeting areas before returning to the classroom, all while physically distancing and wearing masks (as required).
- Once the students and teachers have returned to the classroom, they will sanitize/wash their hands.
- Teacher/school administration documents the fire drill participation.

Note:

- Schools should notify local fire services in advance of the scheduled fire drill to ensure fire trucks are not dispatched.
- Other programs operating within the school (e.g., child care and early years programs) must also be notified to ensure children and staff understand that the sounding of the alarm relates to a fire drill.

Please note that upon actuation of the building fire alarm system outside of a planned fire drill the total evacuation of the school will take place in accordance with procedures outlined in the approved school Fire Safety Plan