

School Safety: Everybody's Business

When it comes to providing a safe environment for learning and growth, is your school faithful in little as well as in much?

Every year, parents and guardians decide which schools their children will attend. They may have chosen your school because of its excellent academic reputation or highly qualified Christian teachers. Perhaps they even chose it for the extracurricular activities. However, it is likely that their children's safety ranked high among their reasons for enrolling them in your school. Parents are thus demonstrating their confidence in your institution's ability to care for their most precious possession.

Is your school worthy of that trust? When it comes to providing a safe environment for learning and growth, is your school faithful in little as well as in much? Whether you are an educator or an administrator, are you doing all that you can to safeguard the hope and promise that children embody? Let's explore some methods you can use to ensure the safety of tomorrow's leaders while they attend Adventist schools today.

The Safety Officer and Safety Committee

Safety involves all aspects of education, from the physical environment to the policies and procedures that define your school's operations. Good safety practices begin with establishing formal procedures for all school-sponsored activities. A safety officer should be designated to coordinate this process, with the support of a safety committee.

What does a safety officer do? In addition to working with the safety committee to establish formal procedures, he or she is responsible for assessing safety concerns and educating faculty, staff, parents, and students on "best practices." The committee should be empowered to provide counsel, implement changes in procedures and policies, recommend action, and even eliminate programs or activities deemed unsafe. However, even if your safety officer and committee are function-

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ing effectively, everyone must take an active part, because *safety is everybody's business*.

Many educational facilities have safety committees but fail to use them effectively. All too often, this group is summoned only after an incident has occurred, and the meetings are held when there is limited time for discussion.

During the safety meeting, someone might report that a student was injured on the playground. Everyone is dismayed and saddened by the incident and inquires about the severity of the injury, but the discussion often ends there.

The committee must dig deeper. Was the equipment in good repair? Was there appropriate cushioning (padding

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or wood chips, depending on the location)? Where was the supervisor? Was the child engaging in an activity beyond his or her skill level? Was this an approved activity, or was it something the child had been warned to avoid?

These are the *who, what, where, when, and why* questions. Once these are answered satisfactorily, the committee must formulate policies to prevent a re-

currence. This might involve improved training for playground supervisors, new policies, or replacement of equipment. Whenever policies are changed, make sure that they are clearly communicated to all the necessary people, and develop a schedule for periodic follow-ups to ensure their effectiveness.

First Aid

Most schools have first-aid kits on hand for emergencies. When was the last time someone checked the kit for outdated materials and replaced them with fresh supplies? How many members of your staff are trained in first aid? In some places, nurses are required by law to be present during the school day. Check with your local governmental agency to determine the require-



ments for your area.

We also strongly recommend having at least one staff or faculty member trained and certified in cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Post an updated list of those certified in first aid and CPR in the office and classrooms. Being prepared is crucial in an emergency situation, when a few seconds can make the difference between life and death.

Fire Protection

What if a fire broke out in your school building right now? Would you know where to take your students? What route would you use to get there? Have you thought about a secondary route if your first choice is blocked? Constant vigilance and preparedness for emergencies is essential.¹ This applies not only to fires, but also to other types of crises such as earthquakes, threats of violence or terrorism from outside or within the school, medical and biohazard emergencies, and weather-related disasters. Emergency protocol should detail who is responsible for what, and provide guidance on how to proceed after the danger subsides.

The local media may send a film crew or ask for an interview, so have a spokesperson trained in handling media inquiries. When communicating with the media, remember that your school's reputation, as well as the church's, is at stake.

Hazard Reporting

When you observe hazards in your school, do you report them to the proper person? Does the school have an effective written reporting system, rather than a word of mouth work order? Many times, hazards are not abated because they have been verbally explained to someone who later forgets to take action. It is important to establish both a written work order system as well as a follow-up plan to ensure that repairs have been completed as specified.

Building Inspections

When did you last schedule a formal inspection of your facilities? Did

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this include the condition of the building and equipment, along with all activities related to their use? Have the hazards discovered during the inspection been rectified? Maintaining vigilance about possible risks on school grounds allows you to remedy potential problems before a crisis occurs, thereby reducing the risk of accident and injury.

People often claim that eliminating or minimizing certain hazards is simply too expensive. However, there is usually more than one way to remedy a hazard. Of course, prevention is the best approach. But sometimes, the solution may require training others to recognize the hazard, so that they can minimize or avoid it. For example, if your building is located in a flood-prone area, you

should take the following precautions:

- Apply a water repellant sealer to the foundations to prevent seepage.
- Have on hand a supply of sandbags and sand.
- Avoid storing items in low-lying areas.
- Keep all roads within the property open and clear in case evacuation becomes necessary.
- Post warning signs at locations on roads that flood frequently.

High-Risk Activities

In analyzing risk, don't forget school-sponsored activities, both on and off campus. Are students at your school participating in any "high-risk" activities that require special knowledge or training (such as classes requiring the use of power tools, rock climbing, cer-



School Inspection Checklist

Hazardous Material

- Material Safety Data Sheet (required by law in the United States), indicating the hazards of chemicals or other product ingredients, made accessible to employees or students using such materials.
- Training provided in safe use of all chemicals.
- Personal protective equipment provided as required.
- Hazardous materials disposed of legally.
- Containment procedure drills for hazardous material spills.
- Hazardous materials locked up if in lower-grade classrooms.

Fire Safety

- Two drills conducted during the first month of school. One drill per month during the remainder of the school year.
- Fire alarm tested during drills.
- Fire extinguishers serviced yearly by a licensed technician.
- School personnel conduct a monthly inspection of each extinguisher to ensure adequate pressure.
- Combustibles kept to a minimum and stored safely in a separate building (not in the main school building). Flammables kept away from open flame, hot surfaces, and electrical exposure. No combustibles stored in furnace rooms.
- Exit lights inspected regularly.
- Locking and chain devices not in use on any panic hardware.¹
- Large trash containers equipped with flip-top lids.
- Oily rags and mops stored in approved metal containers.
- Compressed gas cylinders properly secured.
- Emergency lighting provided.
- Exit doors open in the direction of exit travel.
- Building evacuation plans are posted.
- Doors on boiler and furnace rooms are self-closing and latched.
- Meeting room capacity signs are posted.
- Panic hardware on main exit doors.
- Corridors, exits, and stairs not used for storage.

Disaster Management

- Policies in place to deal with various types of disasters—natural (floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, severe air pollution), terrorism, civil unrest; biohazard risks, and violence.

Picture Removed

- Shelter-in-place plans, including adequate quantities of water and food, sanitation, and first aid.

Walking and Working Surfaces

- Uniform stair step height.
- All stairs equipped with properly secured handrails and midrails on open sides.
- Midrails and toe boards for balconies.
- Floors free of tripping hazards and slippery surfaces.
- Carpets free of tears and wrinkles.
- Floor openings and overhead storage areas are equipped with railings.
- Adequate lighting, inside and out.
- Full-length glass doors and windows properly marked with decals.

Transportation

- All drivers, staff, and volunteers have good driving records and safe driving habits.
- School-owned vehicles maintained on a regular basis and checked often for safety hazards—bald tires, malfunctioning lights, worn brakes, etc.
- Transporting students with safety in mind, including adhering to seating capacity of vehicles.
- Seatbelts fastened by all drivers and riders.
- Non-owned vehicles used for field trips and various activities insured per church working policy.

First Aid

- An area set aside specifically for medical aid. All medicines and equipment kept under lock and key.
- Adult supervisors who are certified in first aid present at all times.
- First-aid kits located throughout the

school facilities—gymnasium, main office, etc.

- Emergency numbers posted in prominent locations (fire, ambulance, poison control).
- Emergency eyewash and emergency shower equipment in science classrooms.
- Fire blankets in labs and maintenance areas.

Security

- Windows at the floor level equipped with locks and screens.
- Safe combination changed on a periodic basis or whenever a change in personnel occurs.
- Locks re-keyed on a periodic basis.
- Up-to-date records maintained for keys assigned to staff.
- Campus fenced to limit access.
- Policies in place to prevent and deal with trespassers and persons carrying weapons.

Miscellaneous Safety Items

- Main electrical switches and shut-off valves labeled.
- Sturdy shelving in storage areas.
- Broken or cracked glass removed and new glass installed.
- Proper guards on machinery and equipment.
- Safety goggles, earplugs, and other protective equipment available where needed.
- Ladders are in good condition.
- Lockout-tagout procedures in place.²

NOTES

1. Panic hardware is the term used for doors that open with only a push instead of a knob that needs to be turned or unlocked, etc. This makes the exit as easy as possible to use in the event of an emergency.

2. Lockout/tagout is an OSHA (U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration) standard that covers the servicing and maintenance of machines and equipment when the unexpected energization/start-up or release of stored energy could cause injury. For example, when rigged with a lockout device, the equipment, once unplugged, cannot be plugged back in by anyone except the person who unplugged it. Tagout involves a device, such as a tag, warning that the equipment is being serviced and cannot be operated until the tag is removed. For more information about lockout/tagout devices, see the following Web site: <http://www.osha.gov/dts/osta/lototaining/tutorial/defs.htm>.

tain tumbling routines, horseback riding, and high ropes courses)? Does the school provide or require proper safety equipment for students engaging in high-risk activities and athletic events? Check your insurance policy to be sure that it covers these events or activities.

The school is legally required to inform parents or guardians of the potential risks of school activities. Permission slips should thoroughly explain the activities taking place. Many times, a lawsuit is filed because the plaintiff failed to inform the victim and/or parent of the potential dangers of the activity.

Lawsuits have become commonplace in developed nations, and their numbers are increasing in developing countries as well. Legal costs to defend against even unsuccessful lawsuits can be substantial. Detailed communication is often the key to reducing the likelihood of legal action against your school, church, and even you personally.

Transportation

The risks of transporting students to and from school activities have attracted a lot of media attention since April 2001, when the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) released a report on the dangers of 15-passenger vans. These vans do not meet school bus standards and are more likely to roll over in emergency situations, causing severe injury and even death. Their roofs may collapse if they flip over, significantly increasing the risk to passengers.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has investigated several serious accidents that highlight a disturbing trend. Some schools are transporting students to and from activities in vehicles that do not meet the federal occupant crash protection standards for school buses. This trend puts children at greater risk for serious or fatal injury in case of an accident. During an 11-month period beginning in the spring of 1998, the NTSB investigated four accidents involving nonconforming buses that resulted in nine deaths and 36 injuries. Most of the victims, including eight of the nine fatalities, were children. In each case, the NTSB found



that the injuries would have been far less serious if the victims had been riding in vehicles that met federal safety standards for school buses.³

Many U.S. states have forbidden the use of nonconforming vans to transport students. In 1974, Congress made it unlawful for dealers and manufacturers to sell or lease new nonconforming buses seating more than 10 passengers for transporting students to or from school-related activities. But even without these laws and the fines for violat-

ing them, why encourage the use of these vehicles, given the increased risk of injury and death in the event of an accident?

Another major cause of transportation accidents is inexperienced drivers. Many times, volunteers who drive students to school events have handled only small cars, which are much easier to maneuver than larger vehicles, such as vans. Such drivers are more likely to lose control of a larger vehicle in an emergency. Requiring driver training and using only qualified drivers are two vital steps your institution can take to prevent transportation risks.

Conclusion

Developing and implementing policies to protect the students in your care is a significant part of your responsibility as an educator. Having an effective safety committee is important for the well being of students, staff, faculty, and others who visit your facilities. But ultimately, every member of the school staff must take a personal interest in the safety issues affecting your school and work together to create a safe learning environment. Remember, safety is everybody's business. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Tina Gifford, "School Violence—A Resource Guide," *Journal of Adventist Education* 59:4 (April/May 1997), p. 37; and Dale Johnson, "Coping With the Unthinkable: Violence in Adventist Schools," *Journal of Adventist Education* 53:2 (December 1990/January 1991), p. 21.
2. See Douglas A. Jones, "When Bad Things Happen to Good Schools: A Crisis Communication Plan," *Journal of Adventist Education* 62:4 (April/May 2000), p. 27.
3. National Transportation Safety Board, Washington, D.C. (June 1999), NTSB/SIR-99/02, PB99-917003.