

COMMUNIQUE

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Fire Drills and the Safe Re-Opening of Schools

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario declared a state of emergency on March 17, 2020, which ended on July 24, 2020 when the *Reopening Ontario Act, 2020* came into force. Despite the ending of the provincial declaration of emergency, COVID-19 transmission continues to pose a significant risk to the people of Ontario. With the re-opening of schools for the 2020-21 school year, it is critical to balance fire safety requirements for schools with public health guidance being provided to reduce the risk of direct infection and transmission of COVID-19 among staff and students.

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 total evacuation fire drills at least three (3) times in each fall and spring term while school is in session, with additional fire drill requirements applying to schools operating in the summer. Fire drill requirements also apply to extended day programs or third-party programs, and to day nurseries that are operated in schools and provide services to children that are pupils of a board (e.g., before- and after-school programs). 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 building. The overcrowding generally associated with total evacuation may lead to an increased risk for COVID-19 transmission. Therefore, it is critical that when planning for the 2020-21 school year, procedures for conducting total evacuation fire drills be aligned with physical distancing guidance provided by public health officials. As such, **Fire Marshal Directive 2020-001, Total Evacuation Fire Drills in Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic** is being issued. The Directive ensures that procedures not typically undertaken during a total evacuation fire drill, but currently necessary to ensure physical distancing, will be deemed to comply with Fire Code requirements for school fire drills.

Finally, while best practice would anticipate all students and staff participating in the 3 mandatory total evacuation fire drills per term required by the Fire Code, in circumstances where modified school attendance may be necessary in response to safe re-opening, fire departments are encouraged to work together with school administrators to maximize, as best possible, participation of all students.

Fire departments are encouraged to work together with administrators of schools, extended day programs, third party programs and day nurseries to ensure a continued level of fire safety for school occupancies. The Office of the Fire Marshal acknowledges that there may be compliance challenges during these unprecedented times and will work to support fire departments in their efforts to ensure fire safety.

For assistance with evaluating options to address fire safety, please contact your local fire protection adviser.

Questions and Answers:

Fire Drills and the Safe Re-Opening of Schools

1. Does everyone need to evacuate during a total evacuation fire drill?

Yes, a total evacuation fire drill requires all occupants of a building to evacuate.

2. Does public health protocol apply during a total evacuation fire drill?

Recommendations and instructions of public health officials play a critical role in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and these guidelines will apply during a school total evacuation fire drill. **Fire Marshal's Directive 2020-001, Total Evacuation Fire Drills in Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic**, ensures that procedures not typically undertaken during a total evacuation fire drill but currently necessary to ensure physical distancing, will be deemed to comply with Fire Code requirements for school fire drills by Assistants to the Fire Marshal.

3. What is best practice with respect to total evacuation fire drills in schools when students are unable to participate due to an adapted in-person teaching model?

When a school board is operating under an adapted in-person teaching model and students are attending school on alternate schedules, a fire drill will only involve the participation of staff and students present on that day. In this scenario, fire departments and school administrators are encouraged to work together to ensure that fire drills are scheduled to maximize the best possible participation of all staff and students during the fall and spring terms.

4. How do “fall term” and “spring term” as referenced by the Fire Code with respect to fire drill requirements for schools, apply to a quad-mester school model?

Schools are required to conduct at least three total evacuation fire drills during each fall and spring term, resulting in an aggregate of six total evacuation fire drills for a normal school year. In a quad-mester model, six fire drills continue to be required for the school year, however with the additional terms and shorter duration, some terms may stagger in between fall and spring seasons. Fire departments and school administrators are encouraged to review the schedule for each term and determine the best dates to conduct fire drills. If a shortened term cannot accommodate three fire drills, consideration for conducting drills based on the calendar months typically associated with fall and spring terms may be considered.

5. Is advance notice of a fire drill permitted?

Fire drills are not required to take place without notice. In fact, advance planning, scheduling and notification are beneficial to mitigate operational concerns. Within the context of the safe re-opening of schools during the 2020-21 school year, advance planning and notice of total evacuation fire drills will facilitate the implementation of practices that comply with public health guidance.