

Fire Marshal Directive 2020 – 001

TOPIC: Total Evacuation Fire Drills in Schools During COVID-19 Pandemic

This directive is issued under the provisions of the *Fire Protection and Prevention Act, 1997*, (FPPA) S.O. 1997, chapter 4, clause 9.(1)(b). It is the responsibility of every Assistant to the Fire Marshal to follow the Fire Marshal's directive as set out in subsection 11.(1) of the FPPA. Further, under clause 9.(2)(b) of the FPPA, the Fire Marshal has the duty to advise municipalities in the interpretation and enforcement of this Act and the Regulations.

Background

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 2020-2021 school year, it is critical to balance fire safety requirements for schools with public health guidance being provided to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

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 for schools operating in the summer. These 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. 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 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 should be aligned with physical distancing guidance provided by local public health officials. As such, a flexible and balanced approach will be required when undertaking total evacuation fire drills.

Directive

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 day nurseries 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.

Rationale

During the 2020-2021 school year, the term "total evacuation fire drill" must allow for procedures that will ensure fire drill evacuations can be conducted safely, in accordance with public health advice, to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

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September 04, 2020