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TO: Heads of Fire Departments
Public School Superintendents and Charter School Leaders

FROM: Jon M. Davine, State Fire Marshal
Pedro Martinez, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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The information contained in this memorandum is a collaborative effort between the Department of Fire Services (DFS) and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). As the beginning of a new school year approaches, many of your departments are engaging school superintendents and principals to provide assistance with fire drills and various emergency plans. With the tragedy of school shootings on the minds of students, parents, and school officials, collaboration between fire departments and school districts may also include school safety planning for non-fire events.

When considering the best ways to prevent, prepare for, and respond to all types of emergencies in schools, life and building safety should be the primary considerations. Every school has been required to have a multi-hazard evacuation plan since 2000. Fire, police, and school officials are required to meet before the start of each school year to review that plan. Therefore, this is a good opportunity to review the requirements under various legal and regulatory authorities, including:

- 527 CMR 1.00, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code, requiring fire drills;
- Chapter 159, Section 363, of the Acts of 2000, requiring multi-hazard evacuation plans;
- M.G.L. Chapter 69, section 8A, requiring medical emergency response plans; and
- M.G.L. Chapter 148, section 2A, requiring schools to report all fires to the local fire department.

School Fire Drills

The DFS *School Fire Safety Reference* (attached to this memorandum) provides an excellent primer on the information that will be necessary as you collaborate with school leadership and other public safety officials. In addition to what is outlined in this pamphlet, please also include in your preparations a

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review of Fire Code sections 10.5, *Fire Drills*, and 10.8, *Emergency Action Plans*. These two code sections set the stage for section 20.2, *Educational Occupancies*. The following are some of the major provisions contained in the referenced documents:

- The responsible school official in charge of the school or the school system shall formulate a plan for the protection and evacuation of all persons in the event of fire, and the plan shall include alternate means of egress for all persons involved. Such plan shall be presented to and approved by the head of the fire department.
- The responsible school official in charge of the school or the school system shall see that each class instructor or supervisor shall receive proper instructions on the fire drill procedures specified for the room or area in which that person carries out their duties before they assume such duties.
- The head of the fire department or their designee shall visit each school at least four times each year (preferably two to three months apart) for the purpose of conducting fire drills. These drills should be coordinated with the person in charge of the school at the time but without advance warning to other school personnel. Inadvertently posting the drill date and time publicly could allow for the drill to be used to do harm. Fire exit drills shall include the complete evacuation of all persons from the building.
- A drill of the multi-hazard evacuation plan required by Chapter 159, Section 363, of the Acts of 2000 shall be permitted to be substituted for one of the four fire drills required by 20.2.4.2 (see next section for more information).
- It is required that every student, in all schools, be advised of the fire drill procedures or take part in a fire drill within three days after entering school. The Department of Fire Services strongly recommends that students take part in a full exit drill within those first three days. However, given the considerations of weather and other factors that may hinder such a drill, some latitude is afforded to ensure students and staff are well advised of the procedure in the absence of a full exit drill.
- A record of all fire exit drills shall be kept on the premises, and persons in charge of such occupancies shall file with the head of the fire department, at least twice per year, written reports providing the following information:

- (1) Time of drill;
- (2) Date of drill;
- (3) Weather conditions when occupants were evacuated;
- (4) Number of occupants evacuated;
- (5) Total time for evacuation;
- (6) Other information relevant to the drill.

To assist in meeting the documentation requirements for fire drills contained in 20.2.4.2.1.5, an additional attachment to this memorandum is a template containing the minimum required information about the drill. The template can be adopted locally and modified to incorporate additional information as desired for such record keeping purposes.

Multi-Hazard Drills

Under Chapter 159, Section 363, of the Acts of 2000, “the superintendent of each school district shall, prior to the beginning of the school year, meet with the fire chief and police chief of the city, town or district to formulate a school specific ‘multi-hazard evacuation plan’ for each school under the superintendent’s supervision. Said multi-hazard evacuation plan shall encompass, but not be limited to, evacuations for fires, hurricanes and other hazardous storms or disasters in which serious bodily injury might occur, shootings and other terrorist activities, and bomb threats. Said plan shall be designed for each school building after a review of each building. Said plan shall include, but not be limited to: (1) establishment of a crisis response team; (2) a designation as to who is in charge of said team and designated substitutes; (3) a communication plan; (4) crisis procedures for safe entrance to and exit from the school by students, parents and employees; and (5) policies for enforcing school discipline and maintaining a safe and orderly environment during the crisis. Each district, with the assistance of the local police and fire departments, shall annually review and update as appropriate said plan. At the beginning of each school year, students at each school shall be instructed as to the plan that is developed.”

Since school staff members should have received advanced training in recognizing hazards, they should be the first to enter a hallway in the event of a hazard. Hazards could include smoke, fire, or an intruder intending to do harm. Staff should practice situational awareness and be prepared to use alternate egress means or make decisions based on the hazards presented. The following are questions that may be posed to staff members during training:

- Do we leave? Or do we stay and shelter in place?
- If we cannot escape through the primary means, what are the alternate means?
- Are windows or other escape routes available?
- What methods can be used to notify officials if the primary egress is blocked?

When assessing emergency plans, these questions should be considered, and the resulting answers should be included in the plan and, at a minimum, practiced through staff training exercises. Consideration and sensitivity should be incorporated into the discussion when explaining and conducting these drills.

Lockdown plans may be incorporated within the multi-hazard evacuation plan, and they may be practiced as one of the four required drills each year.

A Note on Fire Alarms

Fire alarms are a primary safety feature in public buildings. They provide early detection and notification of a potential fire and initiate the evacuation sequence. While a fire alarm system may be used by a school intruder to inflict harm on the building occupants, removing fire alarms or altering the response to a fire alarm notification signal is not the best solution. Delayed evacuation or a “shelter-in-place” fire alarm response may have deadly consequences in the event of a rapidly growing fire.

Removing required fire alarms from public buildings directly conflicts with the intention of the building and life safety codes and disregards the history of lives saved from fires directly resulting from the

effective and reliable technology of fire alarms. School staff and students must be made aware that any fire alarm activation could be alerting them to a catastrophic event.

Classroom and Egress Doors

Classroom and egress doors must comply with the provisions of the State Building Code. These doors are critical components in the means of egress system and must be maintained in a manner that allows students and staff to exit the building safely. Specifically, the code requires all egress doors to be readily openable from the egress side with a single operation and without the use of a key, special knowledge, or effort.

The majority of retrofit classroom door security and barricade devices do not comply with this requirement and are not permitted to be installed. There are door locking devices available which comply with the requirements of the building code and can provide a level of safety while still maintaining egress from within the classrooms and other spaces. For the installation of any door hardware in new or existing buildings, refer to Chapter 10 of the Building Code and consult with the authority that has jurisdiction for specific requirements and allowances.

Door locking devices must comply with the following:

- Door hardware must meet accessibility requirements and not require tight grasping, pinching, or twisting of the wrist to operate.
- Door hardware must be installed between 34” and 48” above the finished floor.
- Manually operated bolt locks or surface locks are not permitted to be used.
- The unlatching of any door or door leaf must not require more than one action.
- Doors may be electromagnetically locked in accordance with 780 CMR 1010.1.9.9.
- Panic or fire exit hardware is required on latching doors along the means of egress that serve 50 or more people.

The best policy is to ensure classroom doors are provided with single action locks and to keep the doors closed and locked at all times during school operation. Doors may prevent entering anytime, but they must not restrict exiting.

School Fire Reporting Law

M.G.L. c. 148, s. 2A, requires public and private school principals to notify the local fire department of any unauthorized fire within the school building or on school grounds. The local fire department is, in turn, required to report this information to the Office of the State Fire Marshal through the Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System (MFIRS).

Youth fire setting is a serious phenomenon that may indicate problems, issues, or needs at home. Adults do not help the young fire setter if they do not react appropriately to every fire: The child may not get the help they need, and the entire school community is put at risk. The Department of Fire Services has created a reporting document that local fire departments may customize for use in their communities. The document, Form FP-200, is attached to this memorandum, along with guidance for fire departments on coding the associated response in MFIRS.

Thank you for your attention to the information and guidance in this memorandum. Please feel free to contact DFS and/or DESE with any questions you may have.

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