



Is it a Fire or is it a shooter? Responding to Fire Alarms in Schools

Reports from the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida have indicated that the assailant used the fire alarm system as a means to draw students into the open. This has generated a great deal of concern among school staff, many of whom have indicated that they intend to ignore fire alarms out of fear of gunman. While the impact of school shootings is extreme, this fear ignores the fact that well over 100 fires occur in Colorado schools annually.

In an effort to protect our citizens from the hazards of both fire and criminal threats, the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC), the Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CSSRC) and Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC) have developed guidelines which we believe provide the best outcome in often fluid situations. These guidelines recognize that each school should have a specific plan, developed in consultation with appropriate fire and law enforcement officials, on how to best respond to incidents:

1. If the fire alarm activates and there are no specific threats against the school or individuals, evacuate immediately upon the alarm sounding. While evacuating, remain vigilant for other dangers.
2. If the fire alarm activates while the school is on lockdown or lockout, do NOT evacuate immediately. If safe to do so, appropriate staff should attempt to identify the source and determine whether there is a fire. Staff and emergency responders may use the intercom to direct evacuation, as appropriate. Faculty and students may need to remain in their lockdown or lockout positions. However, if smoke or other evidence of fire is present, individual staff are encouraged to evaluate the situation. If it is believed that the threat from fire is more serious than the threat from the assailant, staff are encouraged to evacuate. Consider other means to evacuate - such as windows - if appropriate.
3. Upon identifying a specific threat not necessitating lockdown or lockout, administrators should determine whether to evacuate in the event of an alarm. Staff should be notified as soon as possible (ideally prior to any activation of the fire alarm system) to not evacuate on the activation of the fire alarm until advised. Once the threat has been mitigated, faculty and staff should be advised to return to normal evacuation protocol.

If a fire alarm sounds while the threat is active, response should be as for item #2.

Neither DFPC, CSSRC, nor CIAC can possibly identify all potential scenarios. Therefore, we must emphasize that school staff should use their best judgment when faced with dangerous and rapidly changing situations. We encourage staff to discuss potential situations specific to your school's location, arrangement, and student composition with the responsible local fire and law enforcement officials in an effort to be best prepared for the unexpected.

To mitigate the possibility of an assailant using the manual fire alarm boxes (pull stations) as part of an assault, DFPC recognizes that many schools with existing fire alarm systems may be able to eliminate most manual fire alarm boxes. These schools must meet at least one of the following criteria, which are based upon provisions within the International Fire Code:



1. Manual fire alarm boxes are not required in Group E occupancies where all of the following apply:
 - 1.1. Interior corridors are protected by smoke detectors.
 - 1.2. Auditoriums, cafeterias, gymnasiums and similar areas are protected by heat detectors or other approved detection devices.
 - 1.3. Shops and laboratories involving dusts or vapors are protected by heat detectors or other approved detection devices.
 - 1.4. Off-premises monitoring is provided.
 - 1.5. Manual activation is provided from a normally occupied location.
 - 1.6. A means is provided to communicate from the normally occupied location to other areas within the facility.

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2. Manual fire alarm boxes shall not be required in Group E occupancies where all of the following apply:
 - 2.1. The building is equipped throughout with an approved automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with Section 903.3.1.1.
 - 2.2. The fire alarm system will activate on sprinkler water flow.
 - 2.3. Manual activation is provided from a normally occupied location.

Before removing manual fire alarm boxes, schools have been advised to contact DFPC or their local fire department employing certified inspectors to ensure that the school meets one or both of the exceptions. If it does, the School District will need to contract with a qualified alarm contractor prior to performing needed work. The contractor shall receive any required permits prior to modifying the fire alarm system.

The Division has prepared a self-assessment checklist for schools to help them determine whether manual pull stations can be removed from their facilities. Please call the Life Safety Section at if you would like a copy.

Schools which do not meet the provisions of either one of the above exceptions may have other fire code compliant options to control evacuation activities during non-fire events. DFPC encourages school staff to discuss with their local fire department or DFPC to identify these options which might integrate into a facilities plan for fire alarm activation during these events. Fire Departments employing certified inspectors are encouraged to consider alternate means of balancing security and fire safety needs. DFPC will of course provide assistance and advise, if needed.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Colorado Division of Fire Prevention & Control Fire & Life Safety Section 303-239-4100

