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Nearly 200 fire code violations uncovered at Lamorinda schools

By Nick Marnell



Photo Nick Marnell

During the most recent fire inspections of Lamorinda public and private schools, fire officials discovered dozens of code violations that ranged from undocumented fire alarm testing and blocked exits to faulty wiring and improper storage of hazardous materials.

State law requires that the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District inspect all K-12 schools, public and private, in their districts once a year. MOFD schedules its inspections starting the last week of July, so the latest information on the 23 Moraga and Orinda schools is from 2017. ConFire completed inspections of the 11 Lafayette schools in mid-June. Fire officials sent their latest inspection reports for this newspaper to review.

Most of the Lamorinda schools were built long ago, with not enough electrical outlets to handle life in the 21st century. Electrical issues ran high on the list of violations. Examples from the inspection reports included "Remove refrigerator from power strip" and "Remove extension cord and replace with permanent wall outlet."

Excessive storage in exit corridors, and around electrical outlets, did not please the inspectors: "Remove storage in front of electrical panels in electrical room near elevator equipment room on the east side of campus." Signage problems were pointed out at a number of the schools: "Repair exit sign rear west entrance of multipurpose room." Heaven help if an active shooter sprouts up on campus, and kids' egress is impeded by storage material or broken exit signs.

Fire inspectors see many things that the lay person will miss, like violations of improperly marked flame retardant furniture or wall coverings. Often curtains do meet the flame retardant requirement, but if they do not carry a label, the inspector will write up a violation.

Even shoddy housekeeping made the violations list: "Clean dryer vent monthly or more often depending on amount of use," "Computer lab - clean around extinguisher" and "Foyer emergency light non-operable." One school was advised to "Remove bean bags in Room 8."

A hazardous materials violation was reported at Orinda Intermediate School, which had 20 total code violations, the highest number in the fire district. "Storing incompatible materials together, like an oxidizer with gasoline, can result in a violation," said Kathy Leonard, MOFD fire marshal.

Since schools have fire sprinklers, the level of fire safety is very high, said Robert Marshall, ConFire fire marshal. But the schools need to have the sprinkler system looked at and provide documentation of the system maintenance and testing. Same with fire alarms and hydrants. It's great to have them in the schools, but they must be maintained. "Provide annual fire alarm test/inspection documentation" was a common violation uncovered.

For follow-up on simple fixes, MOFD allows the schools one week. If the repairs will take two weeks, the schools need to communicate with the fire district, whose schools recorded 131 fire code violations. "We grind down hard on them. We want this work done when the kids get back to school," Leonard said. ConFire, which reported 68 violations in Lafayette, gives the schools 30 days to get into compliance.

Springhill Elementary led the way among Lafayette schools with 39 violations. "The public has my absolute assurance that we will fix these problems and do it correctly," said Lafayette School District Superintendent Rachel Zinn. "And we will do it as soon as possible."

There was no argument from school officials about the requirement that their schools strictly comply with the fire inspectors' recommendations. "Regular fire inspections are part of a comprehensive safety plan to ensure school safety for students and staff," said Bruce Burns, superintendent of the Moraga School District. "We are grateful for the professionally conducted inspections, insights, recommendations, time to address corrections and timely follow-up."

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