



A Worthwhile Inv

A lack of oversight on safety issues can cost you millions in damages if students are hurt

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The safety of children is of the utmost concern to school board members, administrators, and teachers. Accidents do happen, of course, but you must do everything you can to make sure that the students in your care are not hurt. A lack of oversight on safety issues can cost districts millions of dollars in the damages awarded each year to families of children injured at school.

Consider the following:

- A third-grade teacher told two students to return a television on a cart to the library down the hall. One student rode the cart, and when the other student lost his grip, the television toppled off and landed on the child's head. The child was in a coma for two weeks and suffered permanent brain damage. The television was not strapped down, and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission had issued a warning about the cart years earlier. The jury awarded the student's family \$1.7 million.

- A shop class saw malfunctioned, causing a high school student to lose three fingers on his right hand when he cut a piece of wood on a table saw. The teacher had replaced a bolt in the mechanism that shields the operator's hand with



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one that did not meet the manufacturer's specifications. The accident happened when the bolt loosened. Taking what seemed like a harmless shortcut cost the school district nearly \$1 million in a court settlement.

■ An inner-city first-grade teacher needed more storage space, and so she jumped at a friend's offer of a metal bookcase and cabinet. For months, there was no problem—until a child was pushed into the bookcase's sharp, rusty corner. The wound required numerous stitches, and the child also was at risk for tetanus because of the rust. Failing to inspect or regulate furniture in classrooms cost the district more than \$200,000 in a settlement.

A safe school is a place where students learn and teachers teach in an environment free of physical hazards. It is a setting in which the school pays attention to maintaining equipment and correcting the sometimes hidden hazards that can injure children and others, cause the district embarrassment, and cost large sums of money.

Unnecessary risks in schools must be corrected, firstly and most importantly, to protect the safety of students and staff. They also must be corrected to avoid costly litigation, ver-

dicts, and settlements. Although insurance companies usually pay these settlements, schools and taxpayers ultimately shoulder the burden in the form of higher taxes, expensive legal fees, insurance premium hikes, or even loss of coverage.

Tips for preventing problems

Most safety violations can be prevented through proactive risk management. Teachers and administrators must learn to scrutinize their procedures, equipment use, and personnel practices to ensure the safety of everyone in the school environment. An obvious but all-too-often overlooked example is playground or gym equipment, where numerous injuries can be prevented with proper maintenance.

Safety tips for risk management include:

■ Inspect the school buildings and premises for evidence of hazards with potential for injury to students, staff, and visitors.

■ Establish an inspections log in which observations of potential hazards are recorded, along with actions taken to eliminate the hazards.

■ Assess potential risk related to the use of equipment in the following areas: playground or gym, sports, media center (library and audiovisual carts, televisions), theatrical or television production sets, laboratories, cafeteria (tables, shelving), and other locations.

■ Establish a safety handbook detailing procedures for supervising students in the classroom, on playing fields, at special school events, in eating areas, on school buses, and in hallways.

■ Conduct in-service training and review what staff should look for in classrooms and other locations in the school, how to record potential safety hazards, and how to know when these hazards have been corrected.

■ Establish a prioritized action plan for making corrections based on reported safety hazards and unsafe practices.

■ Develop a risk analysis plan to identify problem areas with the potential for rendering the school vulnerable to lawsuits.

■ Review any past lawsuits to determine the proximate cause of the injury and develop safeguards sufficient to prevent such accidents from recurring.

■ Model and emphasize personal accountability and commitment to creating safe school procedures.

Boards of education that hold superintendents and other key administrators responsible for implementing these steps demonstrate a commitment to shielding everyone in their school from harm. The result will be safer schools for students, teachers, and visitors—and vastly reduced liability. ■

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