



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Little Red Schoolhouse

I am now a senior citizen. I never thought that I would reach that stage of my life. Quite frankly, I was kind of hoping that I would get about forty and stay there forever. The reality that has struck me recently is that I am now one of the old guys and a lot of my experiences are based upon conditions that no longer exist in society.

For example I went to school in a one-room schoolhouse. In that one room schoolhouse were twelve grades. From first grade all the way to seniors in high school. On the one hand I think it was a tremendous advantage to me as a young child to be able to sit in a room and listen to the teacher give lessons to the grades on either side of me. I definitely believe it had a bearing on the development on my reading skills as I pursued my education in later life. That one room schoolhouse also had outdoor toilets.

The relevance to being old and remembering that one room schoolhouse and my current role in the modern fire service is based upon my recent experience of going back to that part of the country and revisiting my past. Imagine my surprise when I went to visit my old one room schoolhouse and found out it doesn't exist anymore. The reason: it burned to the ground. Yes, part of my past went up in smoke.

In actuality losing that little schoolhouse in Kansas is probably not of great significance. But let me springboard forward to another phenomenon here in the State of California. Recently a school district spent countless hundreds of thousands of dollars remodeling a school only to have the school consumed by an arson fire shortly after its completion. It had a devastating effect on the financial aspects of that particular school district. Burning down a one-room schoolhouse is not much of a big deal but burning down a school that serves thousands of students has an economic blow that few communities can really suffer easily.

The solution of course is relatively simple. The purpose behind this article is to talk about why sprinklers belong in schools as much as they belong in any other high-risk occupancy. Granted I have seen numerous hearings in which school officials will do everything in their power to avoid putting automatic sprinkler systems into schools. This has included but not been limited to, making sure that schools have all the exits going to the outside so they wouldn't have to have sprinklers for the life safety of the children. There have been constant efforts to demonstrate that the cost of the sprinkler system is just too expensive on the front end of school construction. I beg to differ.

You see the real issue with schools is not the life safety of the children. Granted the fire service has the experience of having major loss of life in schools in the old days. All one has to do is read the story of



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Our Lady of the Angels fire to bear witness to the tragedy of a fire occurring in a school without adequate fire protection. But today school fires are really an economic issue

The real problem as we move forward in society today is more that of vandalism and outright maliciousness. Fire is often used as a tool of young delinquents whose desire it is to disrupt the educational process. Granted vandalism is not stopped by a sprinkler system but if schools were more adequately protected with security systems linked to fire sprinkler systems chances of the school being taken off the landscape by the act of mischievous and malevolent children would be decreased significantly.

There have been recent efforts to accomplish just that. In the State of California Assemblyman Joe Nations (AB 2343) has authored a bill that would recall automatic sprinkler systems to be installed and all remodeled school districts. As a risk management tool this not only appears to be prudent but also is also strategic in its context.

The following is an excerpt from that law. *“For modernization projects, the automatic fire detection and alarm system required pursuant to subdivision (b) of Section 17074.50 shall consist of smoke or heat detectors, or a combination thereof, as determined by the State Fire Marshal, and an automatic fire sprinkler system installed in the school building. “*

At one point in my career I remember having an extensive discussion with the President of a Chamber of Commerce about a concept called Business Interruption. In the process of that research project I was discussing with our major industries in my community what the consequences were of losses in their buildings with regard to business interruption. Quite frankly most fire departments are fairly knowledgeable about discussing structural damage and were able to articulate structural loss but we know very little about business interruption. What business interruption translates into are sometimes five or six times greater than the actual structural loss. Imagine an industry in your community that is a major employer that must be shut down for a period of three to six months while its occupancy is being restored. That is a significant factor in business

Well, how about educational interruption. Fires in schools don't just destroy textbooks and children's art pasted on the walls. It creates an interruption to an educational process that could have long-term impact on both teachers and children. If you have ever been to a school fire and to talk to the teachers then you know just how devastating this kind of an experience can be to them. I recall once in my career going to a school fire in which children showed up for school the following morning and were emotionally distraught. Educational interruption is also a cost factor that cannot be put into an insurance formula.



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As Federal and State Legislators become more knowledgeable as to the cost benefit of putting automatic fire protection into educational institutions the schoolhouse fire may become a historical event of the past. There is no doubt that educational institutions like almost all other businesses that have ultimately benefited from sprinkler protection were resisted to change. I am often reminded that the three stages of technology that go like this. It won't work, it works but I can't afford it, how did we ever get along without that before.

When sprinkler technology is brought to bear on the educational institution it may help stabilize fire losses within that occupancy very much as it has done so in others such as hotels, that are totally sprinklered and hazardous materials occupancies that are fully sprinklered.

My little red schoolhouse in Baxter Springs Kansas no longer exists. It is just a faint memory. It is just too bad that sprinklers weren't around to retain that little bit of my heritage.