

Are local schools safe from fire?

By Emilie H. Wheeler

In the wake of the Wasatch Junior High fire last week in Salt Lake City, several school districts around the state are looking at changes that could be made to improve schools' chances of avoiding fire. But Cache Valley's two districts are satisfied with their fire protection services, officials say, although not all schools have fire sprinklers.

"Over the past few years, we've stepped up -- in the name of kids' safety," said Paul Jensen, Logan district business administrator.

Wasatch caught fire July 11 and was damaged enough that students will be attending another school this fall. Officials say the fire started in a storage room off the media center and a computer server is to blame for the initial flame.

The 46-year-old school did not have sprinklers, which officials say may have prevented the fire from leaving the area where it started.

Several schools in Cache Valley are old enough to not have sprinklers, but local officials say they feel relatively safe.

"There are still ways to design a building without sprinklers (that make it safe)," said Bruce Parker, Cache district facilities manager.

Parker said in his opinion, fire alarms -- installed in every local school -- "protect the occupants. Fire sprinklers protect the building. If you've got a good-functioning fire alarm, you'll get the kids out without risk."

School was not in session at Wasatch Junior High, and no one was injured by the blaze.

Logan's school district has recently installed a major fire alarm system, which operates by sensing smoke, fire or excessive heat and almost immediately calls Logan fire officials to the scene.

"It shuts everything down and localizes (the problem) to one place," Jensen said of the automatic sensors.

Several schools do have fire sprinklers installed -- including new buildings and those that have been remodeled -- but, contrary to popular opinion, there is not one law that requires new schools to install sprinklers, according to Steve Higley, deputy state fire marshal.

"Any new building built after the adoption of current codes would have to meet certain requirements," Higley said, but there is no code requiring fire sprinkler systems in any given new school. "Various factors determine whether it's needed."

However, "certain requirements" put in place within the last couple years almost certainly require fire sprinklers in newly built public and private schools. According to one recent building code, any new public or private school with a floor area of at least 20,000 square feet must have sprinklers installed, Higley said. But schools built before that code was written do not necessitate installing the sprinklers.

However, Jensen said the district installs sprinklers in all schools that have major remodeling done.

Logan High School's new section, all of Mount Logan Middle School, Wilson Elementary and Bridger Elementary have sprinklers.

Within Cache district, Nibley and River Heights elementaries, Willow Valley 8-9 Center and White Pine Middle School have sprinkler systems. The new Canyon Elementary, to open this fall, will also have the protection installed.

Installing fire sprinklers is expensive, which is why many districts don't immediately sign up for the remodeling project. Local officials feel that other protection devices will suffice.

"It's just so expensive," Parker said. "It's never come up. We're perfectly comfortable with what we have."

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