

Fire, Earth and Wind: Managing Risk in Today's Schools Part 2: The Environment

By Richard Weeks, RSBA

Last Wednesday evening, the fictitious Liberty District School Board spent an hour discussing rental fees for the new Liberty Elementary School playground and athletic fields.

During the televised discussion, the district's school business official passed the superintendent a note that read, "Shouldn't we be more concerned about the possibility that the pressure-treated wood on the playground is contaminated with arsenic?" The superintendent passed the note back to her with this response: "Now is not the time nor the place to discuss the possibility of leached arsenic all over the playground. Please handle this tomorrow."

The next morning, the school business official contacted the environmental engineering firm that Liberty School District has on retainer and asked the firm to test the playground equipment. Extensive testing brought good and bad news. The wood contained no arsenic, but polychlorinated biphenyls showed up in the water from the playground's drinking fountain. The report detailed corrective actions, which the school business official shared with the district administrative team and they moved forward.

Because school business officials are pushed to make difficult decisions quickly when it comes to risk management, they should be aware of the issues associated with environmental safety.



Team Management

School business officials are integral members of the teams that handle crises—big and small—in the school district. A crisis may be as straightforward as the issue in the Liberty School District or it could be as complex as the sprawling disaster of Hurricane Katrina. When addressing environmental risks, school business officials can expect to work with and be a part of a variety of teams.

Environmental engineering consultants:

These trained, licensed, and experienced technicians handle testing and inspections and provide emergency short-term solutions and long-range corrective actions. They can usually provide a quick turnaround on test results—unlike government agencies that are deluged with similar requests. Maintain accounts in your operating budget to cover consulting services fees and laboratory tests, which can become quite expensive.

Government agencies:

Dozens of local, state, and federal agencies have jurisdiction over environmental problems. Alert local municipal officials as soon as a matter is brought to your attention and they will contact the appropriate agencies. Expect to meet with agents who will work with you and your consultants.

Maintain accounts in your operating budget to cover consulting services fees and laboratory tests.

Contractors: You may need to hire contractors or to procure goods and services to address environmental engineering and government



agency recommendations. Whenever the health and safety of staff and students is compromised, you can expect to pay top dollar for corrective actions. Given adequate time and when addressing a problem that is not a serious risk, you can obtain competitive quotes through your jurisdiction's procurement process.

Unless you have special reserve accounts within your district's operations for emergencies, you will need to ask your municipality to fund the contractors' work. Insurance coverage or civil litigation, many months or years later, may help reimburse your district.

School maintenance and custodial personnel:

These employees play an integral role in risk avoidance and management and will work with many if not all of the other teams involved in resolving an environmental issue.

School administrators:

Environmental problems are considerable intrusions into the routine of schooling. Management team meetings are necessary to coordinate potential displacement of staff and students and for organizational issues with busing, school lunch, after-school activities, athletic programs, and parent support groups.

Public relations: The district may prefer to hire a public relations consultant to help handle the media and parents during a crisis. An experienced PR spokesperson is seasoned in dealing with crises and can ensure a consistent message. Relieved of the burden of having to deal with constant media and community inquiries, the superintendent can turn his or her undivided attention to the crisis itself.

School business officials are integral members of the teams that handle crises.

By working with the entire district team, being up to date on legislation, and being proactive, school business officials can manage environmental risk before it turns up in the drinking water or on the playground.

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