

Walking the Fine Line between Classroom Security and Egress: Within NFPA, the Debate Closes

By John Bernhards



A number of recent changes now occurring to National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards will have significant and lasting impacts to fire- and life-safety requirements for K-12 schools and college and university campuses in the coming years.

Among notable changes most recently finalized were those adopted by the NFPA Technical Committee responsible for maintaining NFPA 101, known widely as the “Life Safety Code.” The changes will appear in the upcoming 2018 edition of NFPA 101.

Chapter 15 of NFPA 101, “Existing Educational Occupancies,” will contain a new subsection to be titled “15.2.2.2.4, Classroom Door Locking to Prevent Unwanted Entry.” The changes will permit classroom doors to be locked from inside the classroom, provided the following conditions are met:

1. The locking means can be engaged without opening the classroom door.
2. Unlocking and unlatching from inside the classroom can be accomplished without the use of a key, tool, or special knowledge or effort.
3. To accommodate occupant height, reach, and disability considerations, the releasing mechanism for unlocking and unlatching cannot be located

lower than 34 in. (865 mm) nor exceed 48 in. (1220 mm) above the finished floor.

4. Locks that can be remotely engaged shall be unlockable from inside the classroom without the use of a key, tool, or special knowledge or effort.
5. The door can be unlocked and opened from outside the room with the necessary key or other credential.
6. The locking means cannot modify the door closer, panic hardware, or fire-exit hardware.
7. Modifications to fire-door assemblies, including door hardware, shall be in accordance with NFPA 80, “Standard for Fire Doors and Other Opening Protectives.”
8. The emergency action plan, as defined in Chapter 4 of NFPA 101, must address the use of the locking and unlocking means from within and outside the classroom.
9. Staff shall be drilled in the engagement and release of the locking means, from within and outside the room.

Sadly, these changes come at a time when incidents as well as security concerns surrounding workplace and campus violence, and the threat of active shooters, continue to rise dramatically. Within the last seven years, the number of campus shootings has equaled the number of shootings that have occurred within the 40 years prior (1970-2010).

In response, a flurry of untested and noncompliant door-locking products and systems have been introduced into the marketplace, many targeted specifically for sale to schools. In recent years, legislation has been introduced within state capitals and local jurisdictions to mandate new school and classroom-locking systems and procedures that clearly do not support egress requirements found within NFPA standards and the Life Safety Code.

The situation led to a need for NFPA and the fire- and life-safety community to respond with a solution


within the upcoming 2018 edition of NFPA 101. The alternative would be to watch jurisdictions bow to public and political pressures, take their own lead, independently create their own requirements without proper advisement, and risk lives.

Among the proposed changes for classroom door locks, one hotly contested change was disapproved on June 7 by the NFPA Technical Committee, and was not adopted as part of Chapter 15 of NFPA 101. That change would have added language allowing “not more than two releasing operations” to release a door for egress, as opposed to no more than “one releasing operation.” One releasing operation for building-lock mechanisms has been the mainstay of door-egress requirements for over 30 years. “One release” ensures that egress is made as effortlessly as possible for occupants whenever a fire or similar emergency requires immediate evacuation.

As Newton once observed, “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” To favor or disfavor classroom side-door locks is truly a fine line to walk for fire and life professionals and safety subject-matter experts, all of whom want only the safest possible environment for students, faculty, and staff.

On the one hand, it is feasible to conclude that classroom door-locking systems support shelter in place or “barricading” in the event of an actual active shooter incident, and may provide, under the right circumstances, an important deterrent while also buying precious time for emergency responders at the scene. On the other hand, facilities and safety professionals must recognize the impact that classroom locks could have in the event of a building-fire evacuation, if mandated by the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ).

All facilities and fire- and life-safety professionals have personally witnessed the challenge faced by occupants when operating locks, keys, and latching mechanisms in both drills and real-life emergencies. Operating a locking device is difficult enough under duress, let alone in the presence of audible and flashing alarms, smoke, and fire. With this new obligation under NFPA 101, it will be critically important that APPA mem-

bers—and all educational institutions that may be obligated to adopt these changes—consider simplicity and ease of use in their choice of classroom lock design, as well as regular and proper instruction and drilling of classroom users, faculty, and staff. 

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