

Fire safety report finds 26 serious safety issues in Lee County School District

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Originally published 12:41 p.m., June 23, 2009

Updated 07:52 p.m., June 23, 2009

LEE COUNTY — A safety report due to the State Fire Marshall's Office this month turned up 26 "serious life safety items" in the Lee County School District.

The report, completed annually by all school districts and required by state statute, includes examination of 92 schools and education centers in Lee County. Among the life safety items identified, 14 have been corrected, according to the school district, and the rest are being examined.

The items were outlined briefly in a memo sent by Superintendent James Browder to the School Board earlier this month, and at last week's board meeting, board member Jeanne Dozier commented on the nature of the items identified as life-threatening.

"In some cases they use the term 'life-threatening' — it's kind of a lofty statement they make and I don't think it's adequate," Dozier said. "Obviously every issue that's identified we take very seriously and correct."

Examples include sprinkler heads being too far apart, dead light bulbs and paper towel dispensers that were out of paper.

Browder said the district continues to improve each year by reducing the number of safety items turned up in inspections. The annual report is compiled after inspections conducted by a team from the district's Safety, Security and Inspections Department. Fire and health department officials are also invited to assist, though the Lee County Health Department conducts its own independent inspections once a year.

"When I started doing this seven years ago, we had just come out from under some very intense scrutiny in regard to issues with fire safety in our district," said Browder. "We've developed several processes and procedures. We've categorized the issue so the board knows exactly what it is."

Browder was referring to a period in the district's recent history where fire codes were so neglected in schools that "fire watchers" had to be employed. People were paid to walk the hallways of schools just to keep watch for smoke or flames after then-state Education Commissioner Tom Gallagher ordered a fire and safety review of all state schools in 2000.

Browder said the district is far from that point, and said the annual report is proof of that. The 26 concerns identified in the report are trivial compared to inoperable fire alarms, he said, such as a missing ceiling tile that could act as a vacuum and accelerate the spread of smoke and fire through a building.

The district, by law, performs other regular inspections, like monthly checks on fire alarms.

"The number (of safety items) has continued to go down every year," Browder said. "That's a testament to those things we're doing."

Browder said several of the items are being contested, calling them "a matter of interpretation and discussion."

"If the fire authority says 'absolutely not,' we fix it," Browder said.

The inspection is actually more stringent than the annual checks done by the county health department, said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the Lee County Health Department.

"They focus very much so on the fire code violations," said James-Mesloh. "The health department inspects things that are more considered public health risks. We look for rats, vermin, improper storage of chemicals, mold, water leaks. When they do their own, obviously, they're looking at those things as well, but they're looking at a whole list of things in addition."

The reports compiled by the school district in the latest inspection were forwarded to the Lee County Health Department, which James-Mesloh said simply helps keep the health department in the loop on what the district is doing to keep up to code.

"I think that what they're trying to do is they've got their standards so high that even just the smallest infractions, like a light bulb burns out, they flag," said James-Mesloh. "It doesn't mean they're not diligent. I think they really have some high standards that they're holding themselves to."

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