PEB Exchange, Programme on Educational Building 2003/01

School Safety in France

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https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/716351035433

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PROJECTS

SCHOOL SAFETY IN FRANCE

Whether we are politicians, administrative staff, teachers or parents, we all attach great importance – and rightly so – to every aspect of student safety. The safety of our schools is a particularly sensitive topic because it affects children's lives and is given a high profile in the press.

France's *Observatoire national de la sécurité des établissements scolaires et d'enseignement supérieur*

Aware of this, the French government set up in 1995 the *Observatoire national de la sécurité des établissements scolaires et d'enseignement supérieur*, a national agency for safety in schools and higher education, bringing together the public owners of school buildings, representatives of staff and parents from public-sector schools and those under contract in the private sector, and the relevant ministries. Its mandate covers any issue concerning the safety of people, premises or equipment: solidity of buildings and fire risk, accident analysis and prevention, technology and science equipment, and major hazards. Its annual reports (diagnosis and proposals), drawn up in conjunction with experts, are sent out to government, public authorities and any stakeholders with an interest in safety.

The first French overview of safety in lower and upper secondary schools in the public and private sectors looked at fire safety in 30 000 buildings (11 000 schools). All aspects of alarms, safety lighting, non-compliant doors, stairwell enclosure and smoke control, and the isolation of high-risk areas were closely scrutinised in safety commission reports, and 7% of all buildings (15% in the private sector alone) proved to be at risk.

In 1996 the *Observatoire* drew up a safety inventory of all machine-tools in vocational and technological secondary schools. This was just before the European Directive was due to come into force and at a time when the French criminal code was placing more emphasis on liability for manslaughter or unintentional injury owing to deliberate failure to comply with rules on safety or caution; and the evidence was quite startling. In public sector schools, 30% of the machines failed to comply, 29% were obsolete, 23% had always met safety standards and 18% had been brought up to standard. This is the kind of diagnosis that the *Observatoire* must conduct on a regular basis to ensure that the necessary steps are taken by those in charge.

The *Observatoire*'s track record

The *Observatoire*'s contribution to progress on safety since it was created consists mainly of information and training, accident inventories and subsequent prevention, and progress on regulatory issues. Its publications in the field of fire safety, health and hygiene (*e.g.* asbestos, radon), sports equipment, experimental work and major hazards have been backed up by training initiatives in partnership with the *Institut national d'études de la sécurité civile* (national institute for research into emergency services). Initiatives targeting private secretaries to the regional Prefects and heads of interministerial departments in charge of disaster, emergency and firefighting services have also enabled the Ministry of the Interior to circulate the agency's proposals to players on the ground.

Following the *Observatoire*'s proposals, progress has been made in regulating fire safety (visit reports, circulars on the responsibilities of school/college heads, and the safety of primary pupils). Workshop safety has also been addressed in legislation based on the agency's recommendations (workshop facilities, electrical risk prevention, teacher training and new pedagogical tools). In vocational education, the Ministry has placed considerable emphasis on the safety dimension (physical security, effective monitoring and control, manual/service jobs, laboratory staff, etc.). With regard to healthcare and emergency services in schools, the *Observatoire*'s work is reflected in a national protocol and in the health and safety circulars sent out at the start of the school year. Other ministries such as Youth and Sport have also worked on decrees and laws that reflect the agency's proposals (on goalposts, for instance, and agreements on physical education and sports in schools).

The *Observatoire* and major hazard prevention

In France, major disasters such as the fire at the Pailleron lower secondary school that caused 20 deaths in 1973 have led to progress on safety rules in places of assembly. However, substantial efforts were required before permanent steps were taken to develop a safety culture, apart from regulations covering premises and equipment. Although compulsory fire-evacuation drills are conducted almost everywhere, they are not sufficiently integrated into the school curriculum. Since the severe storms in the 1990s, a major-hazard awareness campaign has been conducted jointly with the Ministry

of the Environment. It has met with little success, as only 10% of educational establishments have any staff who have attended an emergency preparedness course. Recent events, in particular the disaster in Toulouse (see box), have reinforced the general belief that it is important to provide educational teams with the appropriate instructions and tools.

The explosion of a chemical plant in Toulouse in 2001 seriously damaged educational premises housing 20 000 students, and completely destroyed three upper secondary schools. The *Observatoire* visited the sites and began work on the solidity of the buildings, safe areas for students and staff, and emergency preparedness. The main problem in such a situation is that all communications networks immediately break down and the people in charge are completely isolated as they cope with the emergency, whether it is caused by a natural disaster, an industrial accident or a terrorist attack.

This is why a guide (see above) has been drawn up to help educational establishments prepare for an emergency by closely involving students and parents alike. The six-page guide provides information on a set of safety measures enabling them to cope with a major accident until the emergency services arrive. It comes with a set of fact-sheets on the various stages of the safety plan: informing families, assigning responsibilities, emergency telephone numbers, emergency kit, list of absent or injured students, individual observation sheets and conduct in an emergency. Each establishment should draw up its own safety plan covering site-specific hazards and the lay-out of its premises. These individual plans should also be followed up with the appropriate drills.

However prepared a school might be to cope with specific hazards, there is always a possibility that it might have to handle unforeseen or unpredictable situations. Some disasters occur without warning. The curriculum

The chemical explosion in Toulouse

The explosion of a chemical plant in Toulouse on 21 September 2001 resulted in 2 500 casulties and damage to school and university premises, taking a heavy toll on students. Among the more seriously injured were 16 students and two staff members. One secondary student was killed as he left his school's changing rooms. Ready before the others, he was making his way to the gymnasium when the explosion occurred, sending debris, including heavy fragments of metal, hurtling in all directions.

Of the area's 184 nursery and primary schools, 79 sustained some damage, including 30 with serious damage. Twenty-six lower secondary schools were damaged, with one entirely destroyed, as well as 11 upper secondary schools, with three destroyed. Also hit was Mirail University, and the National Polytechnic Institute sustained damage amounting to 55 million euros.

Two of the three upper secondary schools that were destroyed contained 1 500 students at the time of the explosion. In the first, *Lycée Gallieni*, students were attending class or workshops, or were in the changing rooms before going to the gymnasium. All the school's windows were shattered, and walls and false ceilings collapsed. However, the concrete structures resisted. The gymnasium was totally destroyed by the blast.

The second, *Lycée Françoise*, where supporting beams gave way in some buildings, sustained similar damage. Hairdressing students, whose training rooms were wrecked, were injured by flying shards of glass and miscellaneous objects.

The most serious injuries were caused by falling blocks of building material.

The *Lycée Gallieni* in Toulouse after the explosion

should also prepare students for this by teaching some basic reflexes such as not behaving erratically, and controlling panic by avoiding two mistakes: overreacting and underreacting. As part of the work of its major hazards commission, and in partnership with senior officials in the ministries of Education and the Environment, the *Observatoire* does more than just draw up documentation. It identifies and promotes local experiments that merit the attention of the educational community. Finally, much of its work focuses on training or awareness campaigns for all those with an interest in safety.

Safety is possibly the issue that most requires efficient co-operation from every section of the educational community. Arrangements for emergencies, including major hazards, must involve the supervisory authority, the mayor and the educational community as a whole, under the responsibility of the principal; and they cannot be improvised. The *Observatoire*'s ongoing role is to provide back-up in the form of diagnoses, proposals and methodological tools. It is by involving stakeholders in an approach based on joint observation and active risk prevention that all those concerned can join forces in the drive to promote safety.

To find out more, contact:

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NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL DESIGN PROJECTS

Australia's New South Wales Education Facilities Research Group, a joint initiative between the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Public Works and Services, provides action research into issues which impact on school design. These issues include curriculum development, changes in teaching strategies and new directions in school management and organisation. The research group has a programme of work which includes the development of guidelines and training manuals for teachers, parents and students as well as architects, engineers, planners and administrators. Four examples of recent projects are outlined below.

Video to illustrate ways to use new school buildings

New secondary schools currently being built in New South Wales (NSW) not only look different but are conceptually different from those with which many parents and teachers are familiar. These new facilities have been designed with the latest understandings of effective pedagogy and student engagement. For many adults their very concept of a classroom or a staff room may well be challenged by the new designs.

For some teachers the new facilities shift them out of their comfort zone. They require them to change the way in which they teach, from the teacher-centred approach to the role of "facilitator of learning/coach/mentor" which recognises and caters for the different learning styles of students.

To encourage taking up new ways and to ensure that best use is made of new facilities, the NSW Department of Education and Training has created a video to inform the school community about the new designs. The video, "Built to Teach: Designed to Learn", highlights school organisational issues which need to be addressed, allays the fears of staff, encourages and promotes cross curricula dialogue and supports teachers in maximising the learning experiences of all students.

Energy management

In New South Wales the government has set goals in energy reduction for all government agencies at 15% of the 1995 level by 2001 and 25% of the 1995 level by 2005. As part of the government's energy management policy each agency has to formulate an energy management strategy.

Camden High School, with "solar chimneys"