



COLORADO
School Safety Resource Center
Department of Public Safety



COLORADO
Division of Fire
Prevention & Control
Department of Public Safety



CIAC
Colorado Information
Analysis Center
Department of Public Safety

Is it a Fire or is it a shooter? Responding to Fire Alarms in Schools

You're a teacher at school when the fire alarm sounds. What do you do?

For years, the answer was simple: evacuate and wait until you are given the all-clear. However, the answer becomes much more complex when an active shooter becomes part of the equation. This was exhibited during the recent shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. There have been news reports that the assailant activated the fire alarm with the intent of shooting additional victims as they evacuated the school.

If you are teacher facing this situation you must ask yourself: Is the alarm a ruse to threaten more children with violence? Was the alarm activated by smoke from a firearm? Is there truly a fire? If the alarm is a ruse or the result of gunfire, the students may be best protected by remaining in place in the locked-down classroom. However, if there is an actual fire, remaining locked-down may endanger everyone in the classroom as smoke, heat, and toxic gases fill the building. This is not an easy question as either response may -depending upon the particular situation - lead to safety or additional danger.

The Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC), the Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CSSRC) and Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC) are committed to the safety of students, faculty, staff, and visitors to our schools. We have developed the following considerations which we believe provide the best outcome for responding to fire alarms (Each school should have a specific plan, developed in consultation with appropriate fire and law enforcement officials, on how to best respond to incidents.):

1. If the fire alarm activates and there are no specific threats against the school or individuals, evacuate immediately upon the alarm sounding. While evacuating, remain vigilant for other dangers.
2. If the fire alarm activates while the school is on lockdown or lockout, do NOT evacuate immediately. If safe to do so, appropriate staff should attempt to identify the source and determine whether there is a fire. Staff and emergency responders may use the intercom to direct evacuation, as appropriate. Faculty and students may need to remain in their lockdown or lockout positions. However, if smoke or other evidence of fire is present, individual staff are encouraged to evaluate the situation. If it is believed that the threat from fire is more serious than the threat from the assailant, staff are encouraged to evacuate. Consider other means to evacuate - such as windows - if appropriate.
3. Upon identifying a specific threat not necessitating lockdown or lockout, administrators should determine whether to evacuate in the event of an alarm. Staff should be notified as soon as possible (ideally prior to any activation of the fire alarm system) to not evacuate on the activation of the fire alarm until advised. Once the threat has been mitigated, faculty and staff should be advised to return to normal evacuation protocol.

If a fire alarm sounds while the threat is active, response should be as for item #2.



Neither DFPC, CSSRC, nor CIAC can possibly identify all potential scenarios. Therefore, we must emphasize that school staff should use their best judgment when faced with dangerous and rapidly changing situations. We encourage staff to discuss potential situations specific to your school's location, arrangement, and student composition with the responsible local fire and law enforcement officials in an effort to be best prepared for the unexpected.

To mitigate the possibility of an assailant using the manual fire alarm boxes (pull stations) as part of an assault, DFPC would like to emphasize that many schools with existing fire alarm systems may be able to eliminate most manual fire alarm boxes. These schools must meet at least one of the following criteria, which are based upon provisions within the 2015 International Fire Code:

1. Manual fire alarm boxes are not required in Group E occupancies where all of the following apply:
 - 1.1. Interior corridors are protected by smoke detectors.
 - 1.2. Auditoriums, cafeterias, gymnasiums and similar areas are protected by heat detectors or other approved detection devices.
 - 1.3. Shops and laboratories involving dusts or vapors are protected by heat detectors or other approved detection devices.
 - 1.4. Off-premises monitoring is provided.
 - 1.5. Manual activation is provided from a normally occupied location.
 - 1.6. A means is provided to communicate from the normally occupied location to other areas within the facility.

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2. Manual fire alarm boxes shall not be required in Group E occupancies where all of the following apply:
 - 2.1. The building is equipped throughout with an approved automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with Section 903.3.1.1.
 - 2.2. The fire alarm system will activate on sprinkler water flow.
 - 2.3. Manual activation is provided from a normally occupied location.

Before removing manual fire alarm boxes, schools MUST contact DFPC or their local fire department employing certified inspectors to ensure that the school meets one or both of the exceptions. If it does, the School District will need to contract with a qualified alarm contractor prior to performing needed work. The contractor shall receive any required permits prior to modifying the fire alarm system.

Schools which do not meet the provisions of either one of the above exceptions may have other fire code compliant options to control evacuation activities during non-fire events. DFPC encourages school staff to discuss with their local fire department or DFPC to identify these options which might integrate into a facilities plan for fire alarm activation during these events.

Because we know this is a great concern to our stakeholders, DFPC shall expedite our evaluations and subsequent permits to the extent possible.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Colorado Division of Fire Prevention & Control 303-239-4100

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Colorado School Safety Resource Center 303-239-4435

