

Door Assemblies Keep Schools Safe

Classroom security depends on the right lock and a practiced safety plan

BY JEFF WHERRY

A superintendent in Harris County, Texas, doesn't feel prepared. One of the items on her to-do list during the quiet summer months is to make the school more prepared for the unlikely event of an active shooter situation.

She hears different recommendations wherever she turns, from more mental health services to police officers to barricades that look like a device from the old TV show, "MacGyver."

While the best way to prevent school shootings is still being debated, there is finally a consensus standard that clearly defines what is necessary to be prepared if the situation does occur.

A Guide for Safer Schools

NFPA 3000 *Standard for an Active Shooter/ Hostile Event Response (ASHER) Program* was released in 2018 after being developed by a committee of law enforcement, Homeland Security, fire department, school district and other industry professionals. For this article, we will focus on the Facility Preparedness chapter of the standard and the role that door assemblies play.

The good news for school administrators on a tight budget is that you don't need expensive products to comply with NFPA 3000. That is because there are no recorded instances of an active shooter breaching a locked door. Classroom doors are effective as they meet the locking/unlocking and egress requirements of NFPA 101.

While basic hardware can meet these criteria, school security drills have uncovered complications that can occur.



Classroom doors are important security features as long as they meet the locking/unlocking and egress requirements of NFPA 101. There are no recorded instances of an active shooter breaching a locked door.

Making Lockdowns Easier

The first obstacle was that teachers were fumbling with their keys when they had to lock the door as fast as possible from the inside. That inspired school operators to convert their hardware to lock from the inside with push buttons, thumb turns or remote devices. The manually operated locks were further improved by having arrows indicating the direction to turn to lock them, reducing the risk of confusion during a high-pressure situation.

Even with push buttons and thumb turn locks, teachers were still testing the levers to make sure the door was locked, which could make a sound and possibly inch the door open. Clearly there was still room for improvement.

Top: Lockdown is made as easy as possible with hardware such as this that uses color to clearly display if the door is locked or unlocked.

Bottom: Manually operated locks were further improved by having arrows indicating the direction to turn to lock them, reducing the risk of confusion during a high-pressure situation.



Dave Higginson has been with Sargent Manufacturing and Corbin Russwin for 26 years and has seen firsthand how hardware has evolved to improve school security.

“A lot of schools are going beyond basic compliance and selecting hardware that makes their lockdown as easy as possible.” Higginson said. “They’re buying hardware with large indicators on the inside that display if the door is locked or unlocked. They have bright, reflective backing that is visible from 180 degrees so it can be viewed from a crouching position. That allows occupants to follow the protocol of locking the door, turning off the lights, and staying out of sight or closing the blinds, if they have them.”

Most hardware manufacturers offer retrofit kits that make it easy to swap in new hardware with the reflective lock indicator.

Tough as Steel

Hollow metal doors are well suited for retrofits and can be adapted for hardware with indicators, electric hardware, and vision lights. They also excel in school environments where beating up doors is a common extracurricular activity. In fact, an extra heavy-duty door from an SDI-certified manufacturer is tested to withstand 1 million open and close cycles with latching.

Steel is naturally very strong, so there’s no need to go overboard. Door gauges

(level of performance) should be based on the use of the opening. While an extra heavy-duty 16-gauge door makes sense for the school entrance, it would be overkill for the broom closet door. You can see the most common gauges and door designs for the various openings at a school by using the manufacturer-neutral Door Selector tool at SteelDoor.org.

Create a Plan

Having great door assemblies does not mean much if the faculty doesn’t have a game plan for an active threat situation. Is there an alarm? Does it sound different than the fire alarm? Should teachers look in the hallway for nearby students before locking down their rooms? Then what?

NFPA 3000 compliance requires school operators to have a plan and practice it annually.

Superintendents are faced with an overwhelming amount of passionate, well-intentioned suggestions to make their schools safer. As long as they have a plan, and door assemblies that meet basic life safety requirements, they’ll be off to a great start. +



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This handy list from LockDontBlock.org makes it easy to determine if classroom locks are code compliant.



LOCATION

Door hardware operable parts should be located between 34 and 38 inches above the floor, and not require special knowledge or effort, nor key or tool, nor require tight grasping, twisting, or pinching to operate, and accomplished with one operation.



SECURITY

Be easily lockable in case of emergency from within the classroom without opening the door.



LOCKABLE

Lockable and unlockable from outside the door.