

Loss Prevention Tips for Vacant School Buildings

When schools are left vacant or are unoccupied, there are proactive steps that should be taken to help prevent losses due to heating or electrical system malfunctions, water damage, vandalism or other causes.

Heating/Electrical System

- Before the winter months, hire a contractor to inspect the heating system to ensure it is working properly to reduce any potential for freezing.
- If using LP gas, propane gas or oil heat, check the fuel level in the tank periodically to ensure it does not run out of fuel.
- Check the school regularly (at least once a week) to ensure the heating system is operating properly.
- If the heating system is to remain in service, be sure the electric power is not shut off since this will shut down the heating system. Because the electrical service will remain on, inspect the main electrical panel, wiring and outlets. Repair or replace any defective or deficient items.
- If the school building is not to be heated, turn off the fuel at the main shut-off valve to reduce the potential for malfunction and explosion. Check the valve periodically to ensure it is working properly. If the electrical system is to be shut off, it should be shut off at the main circuit breaker and the breaker locked open.
- A chimney service should inspect and clean any chimneys to ensure they are free from obstructions, such as nesting birds. Install chimney guard screencaps to help prevent infestation.

Water Damage

- If the heating system is a hot water system and is to be turned off completely, drain the plumbing system (or properly winterize it) to prevent damage from freezing.
- If the hot water heating system and/or water pipes will not be drained, install a waterflow sensor and low-temperature sensor to be monitored by the alarm system. Keep the thermostat at a consistent temperature throughout the winter months.
- If the water will not be turned off, insulate the water lines that run along exterior walls so that the water supply will be less likely to freeze. If heat tape is used on piping, follow the manufacturer's instructions closely to prevent fires. Open cabinet doors to allow heat from the room to get into concealed spaces. Drain and shut off outdoor water faucets to prevent vandalism and freezing damage. In residential structures shut off dishwasher and washing machine hoses to prevent serious water damage losses.
- If a separate hot water heater is present, inspect it for leaks. If the school property is in an earthquake-prone area, confirm it is retrofitted properly (e.g., strapped to the adjacent wall).
- Regularly check the, insulation, exterior doors and windows and any weather stripping to ensure there are not any major deficiencies present. Water and insects may enter through these openings.
- Regularly inspect the roof for any evidence of damage, leaks, missing or worn roof covering or flashing and replace or repair them to help prevent damage from wind or from water backup from ice that may have formed around the edges.

- Inspect the attic and basement regularly for any evidence of water damage or mold. Fix all leaks, keep appliances clean, and increase ventilation to prevent the growth of molds and bacteria. This also can reduce the potential for insect or rodent infestation.
- Check and clean gutters, downspouts and roof drains in the spring and fall. Clogged gutters and drains can result in basement flooding when the snow melts in northern climates and/or water damage to interior walls in any climate as the water is no longer channeled properly. Check the downspouts and extensions to make sure water is diverted away from the building and does not pond next to the foundation.

Vandalism

- Notify the police department that the property will be vacant and provide emergency notification phone numbers to the police.
- Clear snow from driveways and sidewalks to reduce slip and fall liability losses and from hatch covers and vent openings to prevent melting snow from leaking into the school building and causing damage.
- Promptly repair any significant hazards (e.g., missing or broken railings, or steps, windows, etc.) to give the appearance the building is regularly occupied.
- Stop or forward mail and newspapers to an appropriate address or have it picked up on a regular basis. Even if all mail is stopped, the school building should be checked at least weekly to ensure unread mail, flyers, leaflets, etc., do not build up and add to the vacant/unoccupied appearance of the property.
- Secure external doors and windows with deadbolt locks, security-type hinges and sturdy door frames that cannot be spread apart. Install slide locks or other equivalent security locks on sliding glass doors or French doors in residential type buildings.
- Install a UL-listed central station burglar alarm system, if one does not already exist, or provide guard service to provide adequate security for large commercial buildings.

Miscellaneous

- Remove dead trees or overhanging large tree limbs from the school property that could cause damage.
- In higher wind-exposed or coastal areas, install storm shutters (or other mitigation measures, such as 5/8" marine plywood – remove after the storm) to secure windows ahead of a potentially damaging storm. Anchor fuel tanks and other storage tanks.
- Install a UL-listed central station fire alarm system, if one does not already exist. Wireless detection devices can be utilized to ease installation. In single family dwellings install smoke detectors with at least one on every floor. Test the sensors and system regularly. Install carbon monoxide detectors and test them monthly, especially if the building will be shown to prospective buyers periodically.
- Automatic fire protection systems should be left in service. Adequate building heat must be maintained where wet fire protection systems exist. Where dry systems exist power must be maintained for the air compressors, as well as heat for the valve rooms.