



IS FIRE PREVENTION EDUCATION REALLY WORTH IT?

Every department must make that decision

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The Congressional Report *America Burning* came out over 20 years ago and it told us that although the United States fire service was great at fire suppression, we still had some of the worse mortality statistics in the world. The message was that if there was a fire, some one would put it out. That had to change, and the new message had to become, *How do we prevent fires from happening?*

Starting with the Children

So, how do we prevent fires from happening? There are fire departments that have very active fire prevention programs and there are other fire departments that do very limited fire prevention programs during fire prevention week. The programs all usually start at the same place — with children. This year, as in years past, fire departments and firefighters around the country will spend time in their communities' elementary schools working with school children—a visit for public relations, a visit for civic duty, a visit to help the children and the communities focus on how the chances of fire in each of their lives can be

limited, and a chance to increase their potential for survival in the event that a fire strikes their home.

Although the nation celebrates fire prevention during one lone week in October, the fire service must be vigilant in promoting fire safety and fire prevention fifty-two weeks of the year. But where do we start? How do we start?

Human Error Causes Fires

Most fires are created from human error. Malfunctioning heating appliances like wood stoves and furnaces, carelessly dropped cigarettes or matches, unattended cooking materials left on a stove are all examples of careless acts that could be prevented. These are all potential sources of fire, caused by human error, that may cost a home or a life.

When Congress was commissioned by President Nixon to study the nation's fire problem, over 12,000 people died annually in fires in the United States. When the report was released, it was clear that one of the biggest changes that needed to be made was that community fire departments had to gear up for prevention and education activities. The most recent figures say that less than 5,000 people died in fires

in the United States during 1994. It's still a very high number and many of those deaths were preventable, but it's a lot better than 12,000.

Prevention Starts with Education

Fire Prevention can be categorized into the *Three E's*: **E**ducation, **E**ngineering, and **E**nforcement. Education is where the fire service needs to begin. And this education begins with our communities' young people. The point of fire prevention education with our children is three fold.

First, it gives them the needed life-saving knowledge about fire safety and fire prevention to help make them safer and well prepared. Simple educational campaigns like *Stop, Drop, and Roll* and *Exit Drills in the Home* have been very successful educational messages pushed by the National Fire Protection Association and the Fire Service over the past two decades.

The *second* reason for starting fire safety education in the schools with our children is to reach their families. The message is given to the children at school, reinforced by the teaching staff, and then brought home. When children tell their parents and their families about the day's events and that the fire department came by that day, the message is reinforced with that child. And the message is passed on to more people. Those people may post the fire department's telephone number near the telephone in the home, they may check or change the smoke detector battery, or they may even hold a home fire drill. No matter what the family does with the discussion and information on fire safety, the message has been passed on to more people.

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The *third* reason for beginning our fire prevention message with the schools and the children is that these children will soon be adults—home owners, tax payers, and parents to their own children. An educated consumer is the best consumer. The tax payers and citizens of a community are the department's consumers. If they have a background knowledge of the fire department, they can make educated choices within town government and can assist in the safety education of their own children.

Educating Adults

The education responsibilities of the fire service do not end with the community's children or its school system either. A natural progression from the message being brought home to parents is to grasp educational opportunities that involve adults. Fire departments provide speakers and assistance to community civic groups like the Rotary, Knights of Columbus, Grange, and so on. Educated citizens are not only allies to the fire department politically; they also become allies through networking of information, talents, and even finances. All these things become a benefit — not including the safety education they have received.

Modifying Behavior

The key to education is to modify someone's action or attitude. Most fires are caused by three components: (1) fuel (2) ignition source (3) a careless act. By modifying behavior through an educational program, the fire service can prevent fires by removing one of those variables. That is what fire prevention education is about: to change or modify personal behavior—behavior or attitudes that may cause a fire or a burn injury.

The fire service in general knows the necessity of fire education in the schools and that the education of the community's young people is needed for their future development. What should a fire prevention program include?

Designing a Program

Each community has fire and safety issues and problems that are generic to other communities around the country. Also, each community may have problems that are unique to that area, or even to certain neighborhoods and schools. By evaluating Fire Incident Reports generated by the department, it may become evident that certain causes of fires are more prevalent than others, and certain neighborhoods or certain age groups may be involved more than others. This is where a department's focus begins to narrow from a broader "generic" style visit to the community elementary schools to a more specific educational objective to modify behavior.

Once specific target hazards and target attitudes are brought to light, each department must remember that it does

not exist in a vacuum. Other fire service people and fire departments have experienced similar needs and similar targets in their communities. Networking with other fire departments, firefighters, and other professionals in similar situations is a must. The schools become a collaborating partner with the fire service in an attempt to increase community fire safety through education.

Developing Program Objectives

If a department wants to evaluate its fire prevention education program it first needs to know what the objectives are for the program. The objectives develop a road map for the behavioral modifications wanted. Without having program objectives, the success or failure of the program cannot be evaluated or re-directed. Some general program objectives would include those listed below.

1. Give students some basic safety education important for their development.
2. Attempt to reduce the number of negative incidents targeted by the local department.
3. Attempt to get the verbal and handout materials back to the parents through their children, especially information on the importance of "operating" smoke detectors and changing the detector's battery.
4. Develop a base of support for the fire department in the future taxpayers by developing support in them while they are in the community's elementary school.

Let's review each objective separately.

1. *Student Knowledge.* Are the children more aware of fire problems that exist in their homes or in their school? During post fire interviews with fire victims, many times children are more aware of fire problems and circumstances than parents. Children who have been involved in a fire incident should be interviewed. What role did they have in reporting the fire? What actions were taken by them and their families?

Retention from year to year is phenomenal with the children. It is remarkable what they retain in between department visits. They are reminded of the points, but for the most part it is a review. Children are very astute and can comprehend more than adults give them credit for. Their cognitive or thinking skills can be evaluated through instructional review. Whether or not a program is making an impact can be determined by evaluating what has been retained between department visits and programs.

2. *Targeted Hazards.* Fire reports are not only beneficial in helping to develop needed fire education programs; these records and reports are essential in evaluating the program and reviewing its effectiveness.

If an objective is to reduce the malicious false alarms in a community's elementary schools, then the reports will

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show if that goal has been met. Or if the goal is to reduce burn injuries in a given age group or dumpster fires in a given neighborhood, the reports would be able to show these statistics.

Statistical data is very important for program justification also. If it can be proven that a program works in its objectives to modify a given negative behavior, it is a worthwhile program. If the statistics do not support the program, the program must be re-evaluated and re-directed.

3. *Parental Involvement.* Feedback from parents and educators, although sometimes limited, needs to be sought by the department. Simple messages that require a parent's action is always a good indicator on how the program is being received, and if it's being brought home to the families. Smoke detector batteries and telephone stickers are two means for parental involvement. Stressing the need for action is made during the school-based program and a parent must become involved for the task to be completed. The feedback to the teachers and members of the fire department from parents about *their* activities with the children proves to the department that the message is getting to the families.
4. *Future Taxpayers.* Many departments started school visits in the early 1970s when *America Burning* was published. Now, 24 years later, departments are into second generation fire department visits. Many times the children say "my mom [or dad] came here too,"

or when the message and information is brought home the parents remember their fire safety education from decades ago.

Indicators of Program Review

There are four formal indicators of program review. We can tie these into our program goals and objectives, and with the behavioral modification that the department is looking for through providing educational programs to the public. These four are: institutional change, educational gain, reduced risk, and reduced loss.

Institutional Change is change in the implementation and management of the program itself. This part of the evaluation should take place between the program coordinator and the teaching professionals involved.

Educational Gain measures what the children and their families have learned. The only way to find this out is to ask. Each time part of the program is presented, the last section to be presented can be reviewed. The students' retention of the material is a direct correlation to the program's and instructor's effectiveness.

A second way of evaluation, especially in reaching the parents, is a questionnaire. This questionnaire, sent home with each student, asks the parent questions about the program, questions that directly affect the home's fire safety factor. Even if the program's content had not made it home before, the questionnaire will get *some* basic information home to the remainder of the family.

Reduced Risk can be reviewed similarly to educational gain. We have to ask. A home survey safety form can

be used as a home work assignment.

Reduced Loss can be evaluated by monitoring the fire reports generated by a community. The reports should be constantly observed, not necessarily as individual reports, but rather as a package looking for trends or general fire problems. This kind of review and tally will take reports from three to five years running. The evaluation of the fire prevention program on this level may not be evident for a number of years.

Is the Effort Worth It?

Is fire prevention education worth while? Is the need for public education essential in today's fire service? The answer is yes. Each department must look at its own fire problem, its own schools, its own personnel and decide what is right for it. Can a program be run with lots of money and a staff of trained educators? Yes. Can a quality program be run with a few enthusiastic firefighters and a commitment from the schools? The answer is a resounding YES.

The fire service in the United States has changed drastically over the past 25 years. It continues to change and one of the big changes, one of the positive changes, is in fire safety and prevention education. That is the first "E" of fire prevention education — education of our young people, and education of the community we serve. Ω

About the Author

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Know what? The Boston Fire Department has been trying to get this thing done for 23 years. That's nearly a quarter of a century. The megaplex will probably be completed before nine dead firefighters are honored although they are close to getting approval for a design. No kidding.

What a disgrace. What a terrible indictment of a town, too. In civilized places like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Somerville or Worcester, residents would have quickly done something for firefighters who sacrifice all for them.

Not here, though. Not in Boston, where it's always process before people. What a pathetic tale. Ω

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