



THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

SCHOOL FIRE SAFETY HANDBOOK

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Preface

Following the high rising number of school fires in the country, a committee of various professionals from different stakeholder organizations was constituted by the Minister of Works and transport to develop guidelines to address the growing hazard.

Between January 2022 – August 2022, over 50 school fires were experienced and caused significant disruption to the learning environment coupled with a lot of anxiety in schools and the country at large. The impact of fires outbreaks can be minimized with proper planning during the establishment and development phases of a school in addition to mainstreaming fire safety measures in all its operations.

Purpose

The aim of preparing this handbook is to guide schools in preparing effective school contingency plans to ensure safety of lives and school property including buildings; and further mitigate the impact of any future fire outbreaks and emergent situations.

Components of a typical school in Uganda include:

1. School Neighborhood
2. Access Control
3. Compound
4. Administration block and classrooms
5. Dormitories
6. General assembly areas
7. Kitchen and storage facilities

1 SCHOOL NEIGHBORHOOD

1.1 Surroundings

- All surrounding areas around the school should be kept clear of bushes, tall grasses and trees.
- The school administration should ensure regular checks are done to avoid burning of rubbish inappropriately. Where possible, alternative means of handling rubbish should be discussed with neighbors of the school or the local authority to avoid burning of rubbish near the school buildings, especially near electrical wires, buildings, or fences made of chain-link or any other porous material.
- If the measures in (ii) above are not practical, the school administration should ensure a sand bucket or water reel or fire extinguishers are kept at the closest contact between the school infrastructure and the spot where the rubbish is being burnt.
- Where possible, a member of the support staff should be kept near the afore mentioned areas during the burning exercise to quick response in case of stray fires.

1.2 Community around the school

- Engage/encourage Community participation by school administration in school community sensitive decisions.
- School should provide alternatives before conducting any business that affects community operations e.g. access roads, community wells, etc.
- Local leaders should be represented on the school councils/governing bodies.

2 ACCESS CONTROL - Fence and gate

- Fences should be kept intact at all times, immediately closing all porous access points to avoid unsanctioned access.
- The height of the fence should be in such a way as to avoid easy access by climbing. Approximately 2.4meters at the shortest point is sufficient.
- Where possible, a fence should be kept with anti-burglary equipment like razor wire.

- The integrity of the fencing should be inspected every day by personnel in charge and any breach reported to relevant authority immediately. Any breach that causes the fencing to be porous should be fixed as soon as possible, and a temporary measure placed at the point full time until it is fixed.
- At all times, security lighting should be installed along the fence and these fixtures should be inspected by the security staff every day. Any malfunction should be fixed within 21 days when the school is operational.
- Where practical, the fence should be fit with CCTV cameras with priority given to high risk points.
- Any tall trees or any other objects close enough to the fence to be used by intruders to climb over the fence should be cut down/removed immediately. This includes overreaching branches, power poles, heaps of soil or rubbish, etc. which can aid in intrusion.

3 SYSTEMS AND PROCEDURES

- Emergency drills and sensitization of the whole school community should be conducted at least once a year with a deadline being by the end of June or at the date of servicing the fire equipment.
- Where possible, servicing of the fire equipment should be done on school premises immediately after the emergency drills.
- The fence should be manned by a minimum of two security personnel.
- All security personnel at the gate should be trained in fire and emergency procedures.
- All luggage should be checked for security risk materials like lighters, matchboxes, etc.
- A notice against carrying security risk materials should be displayed at the gate. Emergency contacts should also be displayed on the same notice.

- Disseminate emergency/safety protocols to school stakeholders e.g. parents. Put up an emergency action plan signage at the gate
- All visitors should be recorded clearly for easy accountability in case of an emergency.
- All flammable items like fuels and alcohol should be intercepted and kept at the security desk. This is with exception of items to be used by the school in other activities following a predetermined safety procedure.
- In case of an emergency, special assistance should be rendered to disadvantaged persons e.g. children, persons with disabilities
- The school should ensure that the school safety committee is functional and meets at least once a month; and a safety and security inspection of the school should be done prior to the meeting.

4 COMPOUND

- All walkways should be wide enough to allow easy movement of learners in case of an emergency and should be kept free of uneven grounds.
- A clear designated assembly point should be demarcated and labeled with appropriate signage. The assembly point should be distant from buildings, unobstructed by cars and have easy accessibility for all people including persons with disabilities.
- As far as is reasonably practical, all areas of the compound should be well lit at night.
- Special designated rubbish disposal spaces should be created to avoid burning of rubbish in unsafe places. These spaces should be more than 20meters away from the nearest building or electrical lines otherwise burning should be done offsite.
- The layout of buildings in the school should be in such a way that it supports easy access by a fire tender (truck). All driveways should be kept clear of obstructions. Under no circumstance should a building in the school be inaccessible by a fire tender.

- If possible, every school should have a fire hydrant installed in an accessible point by the fire tender.

5 STRUCTURES AND FACILITIES

5.1 Administration offices and Classrooms

- A special notice board should be designated to fire safety and awareness including a displayed emergency plan, emergency contacts.
- All portable fire extinguishers must be checked monthly by the school safety committee for obvious damage, broken seals, and to ensure that the gauge is in the operable range or, if not equipped with a gauge, for the proper weight. School-based personnel are responsible for monthly inspection of fire extinguishers.
- Pressurized extinguishers (or any other extinguisher that carries a 2-A rating) in hallways must be placed so that the travel distance to reach extinguisher is no more than 75 feet/23meters (distance between extinguishers cannot exceed 150 feet/76meters). All laboratories, shops, mechanical and boiler rooms, and other areas containing special hazards must have an extinguisher(s) rated for use with A, B, and C-type hazards.
- Principals and teachers must inspect all exit facilities daily in order to make sure that all stairways, doors, and other exits are in proper condition. Exit discharge areas must be kept clear of any obstruction.
- Emergency Exit doors must be easily opened from the side of egresses (outwards). Only one locking or latching device is permitted on any exit door. Locking devices that require the use of a key, tool, or special knowledge to open from the egress side of the door are strictly prohibited.
- Exit doors must never be chained, locked, slide-bolted or barred against an egress when a building is occupied. (A building is considered to be occupied when 10 or more adults or one student is present in a facility).

- Means of egress must be marked with illuminated/reflective signs except where locations of exits are otherwise obvious.
- Combustible or flammable materials must not be placed, stored, or kept in any portion of an exit.
- Mirrors must not be placed in or adjacent to an exit in a way that would confuse the direction of egress. Draperies and similar hangings must not obscure an exit.
- Display boards, signs, coat racks, and any other movable equipment that obstructs the path of egress travel is prohibited. Exit access corridors should be not less than six feet clear width.
- Student-prepared artwork and teaching materials may be attached directly to the walls and must not exceed 20 percent of wall areas
- All rooms occupied by learners below 8years should not be located above 1st floor for storied structures. All such rooms should be located as close to exit of the building as possible.
- All emergency lighting systems must be tested for proper operation for a minimum of 30 seconds every month. School-based personnel are responsible for the monthly inspection of emergency lights.
- Keep wiring away from doorways and windows. Never run wiring or extension cords under carpeting, above ceilings, or through walls.
- Do not block electrical panels. Maintain at least 3 feet of clear space in front of the width of all electrical panels.
- Fire drills must be conducted at least once a year, preferably beyond 2 weeks into the second term.
- A record of each fire drill must be maintained at each school and office for review by the fire marshal. These reports must include the following:
 - o Time and date the drill was conducted;
 - o Weather conditions at the time of evacuation;
 - o Number of occupants evacuated;
 - o Total time of evacuation; and
 - o Other information relevant to the drill.
- If a fire is discovered, the fire alarm must immediately be activated and the building evacuated without delay. After

evacuation has been initiated, personnel trained in fire extinguisher operation may attempt to suppress the fire if, in their judgment, this can be accomplished without risk of injury. Evacuation should never be delayed to attempt fire suppression.

5.2 General assembly areas/halls

All the guidelines in section 5.1 apply.

- All assembly rooms must post a sign displaying the maximum capacity. This capacity should never be exceeded.
- When arranging folding seats or chairs for programs, exit aisles must be maintained. The minimum aisle width must be 1 meter.
- All aisles must be kept unobstructed.

5.3 Dormitories

As much as possible boarding facilities should be discouraged in pre-primary and primary schools.

- No sockets outlets should be placed inside dormitories for any reason.
- All loose or exposed wires must be placed under trunking at all times.
- All ceilings must have a fire wall separating different rooms in a dormitory. Fully compartmentalize the dormitory rooms.
- All ceilings must be made of fire-resistant material. Use of soft boards and plywood should be avoided.
- All beds must be a maximum of two tier.
- Any faulty bulbs must be replaced immediately.
- All dormitories for children younger than 10 years must be located on ground floor.
- All dormitories must have fire extinguishers and smoke detectors installed and these must be inspected periodically. Any damaged item must be repaired or replaced immediately.
- All extinguishers must be placed in an easily accessible place, at a maximum height of 1.5 meters and close to the exit doors.

- No ironing, charging of phones or cooking should be done in the dormitories.
- All dormitories must be located at least 3meters away from the fence of the school.
- At ground level, special windows should be placed in the dormitories to act as emergency exits. These should be located at a height not more than 60cm and should not be fitted with burglar proofing. Access to these windows should be left clear at all times.
- For high rise buildings where a balcony is provided windows should not have burglar proofing. A security grill/railing should be provided on the balcony.
- All isles (1.2m minimum) in the dormitories must be kept clear at all times.
- Storage of any type is prohibited in a stairway.
- Draperies and similar hangings must not obscure an exit.
- Mosquito nets should not be connected to roof trusses (timber trusses). Clothes and other objects should not be hanged on roof trusses.

5.4 Kitchen, stores, Laboratories and other facilities

- Volatile and flammable liquids (LPG, paints, paint thinners, oils, wax, gasoline, etc.) must be stored in approved containers. Use of these materials is prohibited in areas where there are open flames, electrical sparks, and running motors. Bulk storage of such materials must be in specified flammable-liquid storage rooms only. In the absence of such a special room, they must be stored in outside areas such as tractor storage rooms
- All gas cylinders must be caged and positioned in such a way that it is not easily accessed by learners.
- Any gas leaks must be reported to relevant authority in the school immediately.
- Only items associated with operations of the kitchen and/or mechanical/laboratory rooms should be stored in these areas. No combustible materials are to be stored in these areas.

- Storage areas and supply rooms must be kept neat and orderly. Empty cartons, old decorations, and other items should not be allowed to accumulate. Storage of these materials must be separated from heat sources.

6 CROSS REFERENCES

1. Building Control Act, 2013
2. National Building Code, 2019
3. The Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2006 (OSHA, 2006)
4. The Education (Pre-primary, Primary and Post primary) Act, 2008
5. The Local Government Act, 1997
6. The National Environment Act, 2019