

Classroom Barricade Devices: A Dangerous Violation of Federal Laws

Most classroom barricade devices violate ADA, NFPA and other federal codes that are designed to enable individuals with disabilities to quickly evacuate a dangerous situation. *By Robert Boyd*

WHETHER YOU SEE the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as a victory or a compromise largely depends on whether you are one of the 53 million Americans who has a disability. While there is no question that the passage of the ADA in 1990 significantly improved access to buildings, transportation and employment, it wasn't nearly as comprehensive as most Americans assume. It generally isn't until we experience a situation that restricts our mobility or that of a loved one that we suddenly appreciate just how many accessibility challenges remain in spite of the ADA.

"The federal ADA was a compromise and could be stronger in a lot of ways," says Curt Decker, the executive director of the National Disability Rights Network. "We had to give up a lot of things we fought for just to get what we have today."

The struggle to achieve accessibility for all Americans has only grown more difficult in recent years. Post 9/11, the focus for construction has shifted from safety and accessibility to security. Keeping intruders from getting into a building is often prioritized over ensuring occupants can safely get out during an emergency.

This battle between accessibility and security is being waged on a number of fronts, but perhaps nowhere more visibly than in K-12 schools, where parents, some law enforcement and school administrators are fighting against fire marshals, code officials and the disabled community. Keeping children safe is the goal of both sides, but opponents of the new security methods being proposed say they violate a number of building codes as well as Federal Accessibility Laws.

CAMPUSES RESPOND TO SHOOTINGS WITH BARRICADES

Tragedies like the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary have left parents, teachers and school administrators understandably concerned about their school's ability to respond to a similar event. But with few financial resources available to properly address the issue, options for enhancing security seem limited.

In response, dozens of retrofit security products are being marketed to school officials. These devices are available in a number of designs, but the goal of each is the same — to turn the classroom door into a barricade that can theoretically prevent an attacker from gaining access. These products are inexpensive, easy to install and very effective at keeping a door closed and preventing an active shooter from entering a classroom. However, they aren't code compliant, and they pose some significant safety issues, particularly for individuals with physical and visual disabilities.

"The 2010 ADA Standards require door hardware to be operable with one hand and without tight grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist," explains Mark Williams of the Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (PASS). "In addition to the model code requirements that

mandate a single releasing operation to unlatch the door, the ADA Standards require releasing mechanisms be located within 34-48 inches above the floor. Many classroom barricade devices do not comply with one or more of these requirements."

These requirements are designed to enable all occupants, including those with disabilities, to quickly evacuate a location during a fire, bomb threat, active shooter attack and other situations. Although these requirements have been in place for decades, many proponents of barricades argue that active shooter situations call for extreme responses and should be exempt from codes mandating free egress, fire protection and accessibility for all.

Another common claim is that active shooter incidents are more common than fires, so therefore security measures should take precedence over fire safety. This argument is particularly worrisome to the National Disability Rights Network.

"Decreasing the tenability of the building decreases the amount of time someone with a physical or mental disability has to evacuate safely," explains Decker. "You make the schools harder to egress, and you are jeopardizing the very kids we have worked for 40 years to get in those classrooms. You're creating a hazard for them in terms of getting out of a building that is under any emergency."

This argument to prioritize security over fire safety also fails to stand up to basic statistics. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), between 2000 and 2013, there were 1,456,500 non-residential structure fires in the United States, with 1,260 civilian deaths and 21,560 civilian injuries. For the same period, the FBI counted 160 active shooter attacks resulting in 487 deaths and 557 injuries. These statistics starkly illustrate how vital life safety is to ensuring the safety of all building occupants.

"The state fire marshals understand the security concerns and the need to protect schools and businesses from senseless acts of violence," says Jim Narva, executive director of the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM). "However, some of the proposed solutions may compromise life safety, despite the manufacturers' good intentions. The NASFM guidelines for classroom security are aligned with the model codes and underscore the importance of the requirement for new and existing classroom doors to unlatch with one operation, ensuring free and immediate egress. Classroom doors must also meet federal accessibility laws and other requirements of the building codes and fire codes."

Not only do barricade devices prevent occupants from evacuating, their use is predicated on the assumption that the assailant will be outside the classroom. But several active shooter incidents have involved the assailant barricading himself inside with the victims, including the shootings at Virginia Tech, the West Nickel Mines Amish School and Platte Canyon High School. In all three



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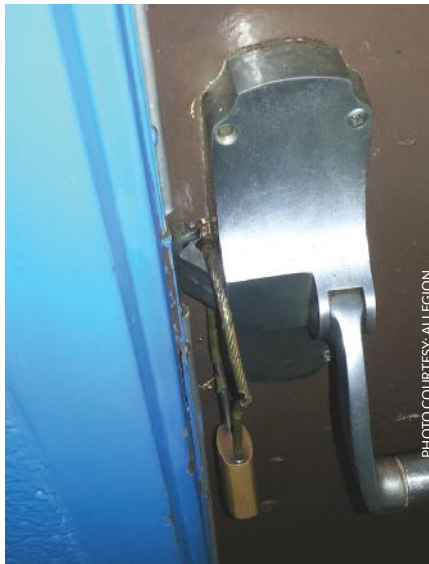


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These are just a few examples of unsafe hardware that have been installed on doors throughout the nation.

situations, barricaded doors likely contributed to the loss of life by delaying first responder access.

BARRICADES USUALLY DON'T COMPLY WITH CODES

For the past several years, the battle over the use of barricade devices has raged across the country, with code officials fighting desperately to prevent life safety from being compromised in the rush to upgrade classroom security. Several states went so far as to enact their own guidelines in order to allow schools to install these devices.

"In a few states, legislators have been pressured by constituents to change state building and fire-safety codes so that classroom barricade devices can be used," says Lori Greene, DAHC/CDC, CCPR, FDAI, FDHI, manager – codes and resources for Allegion. "During these legislative proceedings, the egress and accessibility requirements have been overlooked in favor of less-expensive security products."

In response, the issue of barricade devices was the focus of extensive debate during the last code development cycle, as various industry experts reviewed the existing codes to determine what, if anything, should be changed to properly address this issue. The result was an overwhelming decision to not only maintain existing egress require-

ments for classroom doors, but to add an additional safety mandate. As a result, the 2018 editions of the International Building Code (IBC), International Fire Code (IFC), and NFPA 101 – *The Life Safety Code* will include the following requirements for classroom doors:

- ◆ Any latches installed on egress doors must be able to be unlatched simultaneously by a single releasing operation from the egress side. Hardware used to release the latches must be mounted between 34 inches and 48 inches above the floor.
- ◆ Operation of the hardware for egress must be accomplished without tight grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist, and without using a key, tool, special knowledge or effort. Electrified locks may be remotely engaged to prevent access, but they must allow free egress from the classroom side of the door.
- ◆ Locked classroom doors must be able to be unlocked from the outside with a key or other approved means, to allow access for school staff and emergency responders (this is the new requirement that was added to the 2018 model codes).
- ◆ Door closers, panic hardware and fire exit hardware may not be modified by retrofit locking devices and modifications to fire door assemblies must be in accordance with NFPA 80 – *Standard for Fire Doors and Other Opening Protectives*.

- ◆ The facility's emergency plan must address locking and unlocking classroom doors, and staff must be drilled in these operations.
- ◆ In addition, NFPA 101 requires the doors to be lockable from within the classroom, without opening the door.

But while this may appear to have been a great victory for those fighting on the side of accessibility and life safety, it will be several years before these new codes are adopted. In the meantime, parents and school administrators continue to be seduced by the promise of a quick and inexpensive solution to their security needs.

"The revised model codes should be used by state code officials to illustrate the position of all stakeholders in the code-development process," says Greene. "Life safety must be prioritized in all security decisions."

Not only do barricade devices prevent occupants from evacuating, their use is predicated on the assumption that the assailant will be outside the classroom. Several active shooter incidents have involved the assailant barricading himself inside with the victims. Barricaded doors likely contributed to the loss of life by delaying first responder access.

SOME STATE CODES VIOLATE FEDERAL LAW

Although the building and fire code community has clearly ruled that these barricade devices do not meet the necessary egress and fire safety requirements, their seemingly blatant violations of federal laws have yet to be litigated. The ADA is a federal law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and sets standards for accessible access and egress. Classroom doors nationwide are required to comply with the ADA, and it is unclear how several states have adopted codes to permit use of devices that are so obviously in conflict with a federal law.

"When discussing school classroom security and safety, the topic of accessibility for students with disabilities unfortunately usually merits only a second thought," says Jerry Heppes Sr., CAE, chief executive officer of the Door Security and Safety Foundation. "Additionally, ADA standards for accessible design are often only thought of as providing *access* for persons with disabilities. But the reality is, especially when it comes to classroom security, it is equally important to provide safe *egress* for those with disabilities from the classroom. Any classroom door security device must, by federal law, provide that safe egress as defined by the operational requirements of the ADA standard."

In addition to the ADA requirements, Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C. § 794, mandates that people with disabilities have equal access to programs, services, activities and facilities

that receive Federal financial assistance, such as schools. It states:

"Each facility or part of a facility which is altered by, on behalf of, or for the use of a recipient after the effective date of this part in a manner that affects or could affect the usability of the facility or part of the facility shall, to the maximum extent feasible, be altered in such manner that the altered portion of the facility is readily accessible to and usable by handicapped persons."

The installation of a barricade device on a classroom door is clearly discriminatory to those with physical or visual impairments, it impedes egress, is not located 34 to 48 inches above the floor, requires more than one action to release the door and as a result is in clear violation of standards and laws regarding accessibility.

NOT BEING CODE COMPLIANT CAN BE COSTLY

"As the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission stated in their final report, there is not one documented incident of an active shooter breaching a locked [interior] door," explains Williams. "In other words, we have code compliant solutions that work and provide both security and life safety for *all* building occupants."

Whether school administrators choose to adjust security protocols incorporating existing locks, install classroom security locks or invest in electrified locks that can be secured remotely, code-compliant solutions are available. Not only will schools not save money by installing inexpensive barricade devices, they expose themselves to a number of new liabilities as well as potential fines for ADA violations.

"If you can't get people out of a building, how is that safer?" asks Decker. "These devices can have that unintended consequence. We believe that all of these barricade devices fail to take into account the impact they could have on people with disabilities."

The recent changes made to the model codes should help establish more consistent requirements for classroom security. However, when working to increase the security of an educational facility or any type of building, it's vital to ensure safe access and egress for *all* occupants during any type of emergency — not just active shooters and terrorism, but also fire, severe weather, natural disasters and other types of emergencies that schools are statistically far more likely to face.

States must adopt standards for securing school facilities that meet all relevant laws and codes. Those standards must create secure environments while ensuring the safety of all occupants — and they should do so without turning our schools into prisons. Contrary to what the purveyors of barricades may claim, those standards can be easily implemented, affordably, using legal and code-compliant hardware.

It is irresponsible to make it difficult for anyone, regardless of their ability, to flee a hazardous situation. It is equally irresponsible to allow the use of locking devices that could be deployed as barricades by someone seeking to do harm to others. Schools house our most vulnerable population, our children, and their safety should not be jeopardized by misguided efforts to enhance security. **CS**

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