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**NEWS
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School safety initiative launched to prepare public and private schools for emergencies

Law requires schools, fire departments to plan comprehensive safety drills

SPRINGFIELD – Schools across the state currently are working with their local fire departments to schedule emergency evacuation drills required under a state school safety initiative launched this school year. The drill requirements are part of the School Safety Drill Act, proposed by Governor Rod R. Blagojevich and signed into law in August 2005, and are designed to help protect schoolchildren during emergencies.

“As parents, we expect our children to be safe when we send them off to school each day,” said State Fire Marshal David Foreman. “Emergencies strike suddenly, without warning. Regular drills help teachers and students know exactly where to go and how to get there quickly. We hope an emergency never occurs, but when it does we want everyone to immediately know what to do to stay safe.”

Under the School Safety Drill Act, all public and private schools are required to conduct three evacuation drills, one bus evacuation and one severe weather drill each school year. Although not required, schools also are strongly encouraged to conduct a law enforcement drill, which could include an intruder scenario or other event that would require school officials to secure the building or implement a reverse evacuation.

The new requirements significantly improve school emergency preparedness by, for the first time, setting clear, minimum requirements and standards for public and private school emergency planning. The law also requires schools to work closely with emergency first responder agencies in conducting annual reviews of the school emergency and crisis response plan.

“School drills are a key tool for ensuring that students and school personnel are prepared if a disaster ever strikes,” said Foreman. “The fire services and other first responders are eager to

work with their local schools to help ensure the safety of every child, and the School Safety Drill Act will further promote this critical interaction between schools and their local first responders.”

By September 15, schools are to propose potential dates in October for an evacuation drill that will be observed by their local fire department. If needed, schools and fire departments can agree on a date outside of October. If the school and local fire department are unable to find a mutually agreeable date for the drill, the school can proceed with the drill without the fire department observing.

“Given recent terrorism threats and unfortunate violent incidents at schools nationwide, the School Safety Drill Act is an important piece of legislation that helps to ensure our schools are prepared for any potential emergencies that schools may face here in Illinois,” said State Superintendent Randy Dunn. “I encourage all districts to work with local emergency officials and first responders, so that we can help to ensure the safety of all Illinois students.”

Another part of the Governor’s school security initiatives is also being implementing this school year. A new “School Emergency and Crisis Response Plan Template” was developed to provide schools with a single, comprehensive emergency planning guide. Staff from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Terrorism Task Force (ITTF) and the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) collaborated on the updated document, which replaced multiple, and often conflicting, guidance documents that previously were referenced by schools.

The ‘School Emergency and Crisis Response Plan Template’ link is available on the ISBE website at: <http://www.isbe.net/safety/default.htm>.

In addition to the school drills and new emergency planning guidance, the Governor’s school security initiative included the development of training for school district personnel to help them design, implement and practice crisis response and management plans. The “Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Illinois Schools” training was launched in December 2004, and to date personnel from nearly 700 public and private schools have received that training at one of the 45 one-day training sessions conducted throughout the state. The training is funded through a grant from the ITTF. In addition, five “Train-the-Trainer” courses have also been conducted to expand the pool of trainers for the “Multi-Hazard” course.

In October, 2004, Gov. Blagojevich announced school security initiatives aimed at providing better protection for the state’s school children during emergencies. The Governor directed the Illinois Terrorism Task Force (ITTF), the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) to work with schools and first responders to refine the maze of fire and tornado drill statutes and regulations and ensure that school drills effectively address the hazards facing schools in today’s world.

Under the Governor’s leadership, the ITTF, ISBE and OSFM brought together a group of organizations to write the legislation that established minimum requirements and standards for public and private schools to follow in emergency and crisis response plans. House Bill 2693 was sponsored by Representative Michael Smith (D-Canton) and Senator Arthur Wilhelmi (D-Aurora). Groups that worked to develop the legislation include the Illinois Principals

Association (IPA), the Illinois Fire Services Association (IFSA), the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association (IFCA), Illinois Fire Safety Alliance (IFSA), the Illinois Law Enforcement Alarm System (ILEAS), the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the Illinois Education Association (IEA), the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents (IARS), the Illinois Emergency Services Management Association (IESMA), and the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA).