

HEATING STANDARDS IN SCHOOLS

Although many powers are transferred from the Education and Library Boards to the Board of Governors under LMS, ELBs still retain the primary statutory responsibility for the health and safety of staff and pupils. Whilst certain tasks and functions may be delegated via the Board of Governors – Principals overall responsibility for the safe functioning of the heating system and the maintenance of minimum temperature standards remains that of the ELB.

Every year in the winter months many enquiries are received from members as to the minimum temperatures in schools. The Education (School Premises) Regulations DES Design Note 17 “Guidance for Environmental Design and Fuel Conservation in Educational Buildings” – recommend that the heating system should maintain a temperature of 18 degrees centigrade in areas where there is an average level of clothing and activity (e.g. classrooms). Temperature levels are also given for other activities.

The INTO view is that the minimum temperature for the working environment (ie classrooms) should be 18 degrees centigrade (64.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and under no circumstances should fall below the comparable standard required by the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act of 16 degrees centigrade.

There should also be available in schools at least one easily accessible air temperature thermometer which staff may use to check the temperature of rooms in which a reasonable temperature must be maintained.

What To Do When it is Cold

The INTO recommends:

- (a) that “minimum acceptable heating requirements” should be defined as a temperature of 16 degrees centigrade being reached by 10.00AM or one hour after the beginning of the school day whichever is the later, and
- (b) that no teacher should be required to teach in a classroom which is below 16 degrees centigrade.

In the event of temperatures either not reaching or falling below the acceptable minimum of 16 degrees centigrade, the School Representative should be informed. The Representative should verify the temperature in the room(s) concerned and, if possible, find out the extent of the problem.

The School Representative should inform the principal of the complaint giving detail of temperatures of rooms concerned. Alternative adequately heated teaching accommodation should be arranged. If this is not possible, management should be informed and asked to provide alternative means of heating. If the problem has been caused by a breakdown of the heating plant, the Area Board should also be informed.

If it is clear that minimum acceptable temperatures cannot be reached in a further short space of time, the principal should be asked to put the following procedure into operation.

1. Arrange for classes to be assembled in the gym or other suitable room.
2. Those children who normally go home for lunch should be asked not to return. Teachers continue to have a common law duty of care towards the children for the remainder of the school day and no child should be sent home unless it is safe to do so.
3. Any supervision of pupils remaining on the school premises should be carried out on a rota basis.
4. No guarantee can be given that adequate heating can be provided on the following day, children should be told not to return to school until further notice.

Heating Problems

The type of heating problems occurring in schools usually fall into one of four categories:

1. Long Standing Faults

Many problems result from long-standing faults or inadequacies in school heating systems which the ELB is unwilling to repair. Where such faults exist the school's Health and Safety representative should take the following steps below:-

- (a) The matter should be raised with the Principal in order that he or she can bring the difficulties to the ELB or CCMS or the Governors;
- (b) Temperatures should be monitored on a twice-daily basis preferably an hour after the commencement of each session and at a height of 0.5m from the floor. This information should be used as evidence of the problem;
- (c) If the ELB or, where appropriate, the school is unable to repair the fault or is unwilling to accept that difficulties exist, the INTO's Northern Committee representative or Northern Office should be involved and asked to take the matter up on behalf of members in the school;
- (d) Where the cold is intolerable and the fault cannot be remedied within twenty-four hours, consideration will need to be given to closing all or part of the school. The Principal is responsible for the internal organisation and management of the school and has the power to act in an emergency of this kind. Where such a decision is taken, adequate notice of the closure should be given and pupils should be given notes for their parents informing them that the school will remain closed until adequate heating has been restored.

2. Sudden Failures

Sudden emergency failures in the heating system which cannot be resolved quickly should give rise to consideration of whether the schools or parts of the school may be closed.

3. Temporary Faults

Temporary faults occurring in school heating systems which can be resolved within 24 hours will need to be treated differently. Closure of the school will, in most cases, be impossible since there will be no opportunity to provide notice of a closure to parents. It may be possible to close those parts of the school most severely affected, re-arrange time tabling or bring in some temporary heating source (See Section on Portable Heaters). Alleviation of the problem caused by such temporary faults will be dependant on the circumstances but the Northern Committee Representative and/or Northern Office will be able to give further advice.

4. ELB Heating Policies

A number of Education and Library Boards have introduced policies designed to save heating costs. These vary from advising the schools to turn down boiler temperatures, to extending Christmas and other holidays so that schools do not have to be heated during those periods and securing thermostatic devices in mobile classrooms. Where the ELB policies are resulting in inadequate levels of heating, the matter should be raised with your Northern Committee Representative.

Portable Temporary Heaters

If heating faults cannot be completed repaired immediately the ELB may wish to install portable gas or electric heaters as a temporary measure. The INTO advises great caution in the use of portable heaters and they should only be used in an emergency. Where they are used, consideration should be given to the following points:

- (a) the age of the pupils and the suitability of any portable heaters;
- (b) the possibility of pupils or teachers coming into contact with the burner unit or knocking a heater over;
- (c) the location of heaters in a suitable position away from sunlight, heat and combustible material;
- (d) the need to use a safety guard which is affixed to the floor or the wall;

- (e) the need to ensure that heaters are not moved from the position in which they were originally installed other than by the contractor;
- (f) the fact that on no account should the teachers operate the heaters in any capacity eg., turn them on or off, or adjust them, change gas cylinders, move them etc;
- (g) the need to ensure that heaters are installed by trained and skilled operators, that they are adequately maintained to make sure they are working properly and that there are not leaks from gas heaters;
- (h) the need to ensure proper ventilation where portable gas heaters are used otherwise quantities of carbon monoxide and the water vapour might result. The condensation may cause slippery floors, damp clothing and the fumes can cause sore throats, cough, headaches, dizziness and streaming eyes;
- (i) the storage of gas cylinders in line with HSE guidance on liquefied petroleum gas. The gas is inflammable and cylinders must be stored properly outside the building. If there are problems the health and safety inspectorate should be contacted;
- (j) the fact that temporary electric heaters can create hazards by overloading the circuits, especially where a number are being used at the same time; and
- (k) the fact that some fan-assisted electric heaters and electric storage heaters contain asbestos and may release small amounts of asbestos fibres into the air. Tests should be carried out by the ELB and any insulation materials containing asbestos should be removed or sealed by trained personnel.

Bearing in mind the above points and the need to ensure that temporary heating systems do not affect the health of teachers and pupils, such heat sources should not be used permanently and should be confined to use during genuine emergencies only.

September 2003