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Implementation

M.G.L. Chapter 71 requires fire safety education to be taught in the schools. You can help schools meet that mandate.

Funding

Locating funding sources can be difficult. Fire safety education is often not at the top of municipal fire department budget requests. Like manpower, apparatus, and suppression equipment, fire safety education should be a priority. Strong advocacy is needed to bring it to the top of the priority list.

In Massachusetts, the S.A.F.E. (Student Awareness of Fire Education) grant program has been successful in providing seed money to communities to fund fire safety education. Success builds on success. Use the seed money to leverage other resources from the community whether it is the creation of a line item in the fire department budget, school or health departments committing resources. Seek donations from local civic, business or labor organizations for printing, or to purchase materials, a fire safety house, videos or other props.

Many New England companies have corporate policies that include supporting worthy local causes.

The Federal Fire Act has made federal grant money available to fire departments. Fire prevention and education is one category of the program.

Produce and Distribute Materials

You will need to purchase or produce your materials in sufficient quantity for your audience. Consider using the vocational high school, or persuading a local business to donate the printing and copying. If you plan to give away materials such as smoke alarms or batteries you need to acquire them. Can you purchase them out of your budget or do you need to find a donation?

Think about the methods you will use to distribute your materials. How will you get them to your audience? Will you leave flyers at the library or a laundromat? Will you give a presentation and hand them out? Will you use them in a classroom presentation or send them home to caregivers? Will the boy scouts hand out leaflets door-to-door? Are you leaving information behind after an inspection?

Implementation (Continued)

SELECT, TRAIN AND SCHEDULE FIRE EDUCATORS

There may be people in your organization willing to help you with your fire education program. If you are willing to ask, you may be surprised at the positive response. Their willingness to make the commitment is extremely important; everything else they need to know can be learned. Children quickly sense whether people are genuinely interested in being with them or not.

If fire educators are going into the schools, they need training. They represent your program and your fire department. If they are not trained they will not have credibility with school or community partners. Without credibility, you will not have a program. Training can be as simple as reviewing the lesson plan and materials and watching someone else deliver the lesson. Many educators start out as helpers, the people who put on the gear or dress up as Sparky®. The Massachusetts Firefighting Academy and the National Fire Academy provide training for public fire and life safety educators. Many states sponsor conferences and seminars where training can be obtained for fire educators. Look for the Massachusetts Fire and Life Safety Education Conference that is held each year in September.

You will need to schedule the presentation with the school. Make sure you can stay through the entire presentation. The teacher is giving you valuable classroom time. You need to appreciate and respect that time.

Logistics

Make a list of what you need to take with you for your classroom presentations including lesson plans, props, enough handouts and send-home materials, and audiovisual equipment. If you are going to show a video, make sure the equipment is available in the room you will be using. Will you be traveling from room to room lugging your materials and equipment, or will you be able to be set up in one room and remain there all day with the students coming to you? If you are using a fire safety house you will need enough parking spaces blocked off. Be sure you consider the turning radius of the vehicle and tow vehicle when asking for the space.

Getting Your Program into the Schools

There are a variety of creative ways to get into the schools. Remember that you are asking for permission to come into their classrooms. You are also asking for their assistance and cooperation. Sometimes it is how you ask, and not what you ask for, that makes the difference. Build that community partnership one classroom, one school at a time.

Implementation (Continued)

Time and Need

Be aware that the Department of Education guidelines require teachers to spend a certain amount of time teaching particular subjects each day. Schools will be concerned that your lesson will take precious time from their tight schedule. Therefore, it is important that your lessons be interdisciplinary. For instance, if you will be in the classroom during math, explain to the school or teacher that you can present your key fire safety behavior as a math lesson. (Ex. If there are 3 smoke alarms in the house and only one is working, what percentage of my alarms work? Chart and graph the number of working smoke alarms. Have students work in small groups then compare the results.)

Find an Ally

Your best ally is an interested teacher, principal or superintendent. Fire and burn safety is a required part of the health curriculum, so the health teacher might be a good initial contact. Remember the teacher may not have many hours with each class, so offer to help with the fire safety segment.

Start Small

Start with the Kindergarten or First Grade whose time schedule may be more flexible. Earn credibility the first year by being well prepared with appropriate, interesting lessons. Build on that the next year and expand your program.

Each School is Unique

Each school is unique and managed in a different way. You may be welcomed in one school and rebuffed by another. If one school is not receptive, try another. Adjust your program or style to adapt to the uniqueness of each school.

Be Prepared, Be Flexible

Be prepared when you approach the schools. Know what behaviors you want to teach to what age group. Have your lesson plans ready, but ask for their professional advice. Adjust your plans as needed.

Gatekeepers

Some of the following people or groups involved with schools may be willing to work with you.

- Superintendent
- Principal
- Parent/Teacher Organization
- School Resource/D.A.R.E. Officer
- Tobacco Coalition
- Health Council
- Health Teacher
- Classroom teacher
- School Nurse
- Gym or Art Teacher
- Parent Advisory Council

Implementation (Continued)

The best guarantee for a positive experience is thoughtful planning. If possible, meet with the classroom teacher in advance to learn how you can tailor your lesson to fit with the subject being taught. This will also give you an opportunity to ask about typical behaviors for the age group, any special needs or issues a child might have, age appropriateness of your materials, birthdays or expectations for the students. Communication with the teacher is essential. Remember that you are expected to be there for a certain period of time. If necessary, the classroom teacher should be made aware that it is possible you may be called out of the classroom suddenly. However, this should be avoided if at all possible.

Classroom Management for Visiting Presenters

Questions vs. Stories

Young students often have difficulty distinguishing between stories and questions. Gentle reminders and reinforcement can help students think about their "questions" before asking. Another technique is to tell students you will save a few minutes at the end of class for them to ask questions or share stories.

Most of the time, a well-prepared fire educator will not experience any major discipline problems. The students are often so enthralled by your presence that they don't misbehave. However, a set of ground rules can prove helpful. Ask the classroom teacher what the rules are. Be sure to follow them yourself. In most cases you can look to the classroom teacher to monitor and enforce the classroom's rules. If you find yourself in a situation where you have to establish the rules, keep it simple. Usually three or four rules are sufficient. Some examples are: raise your hand, be a good listener, wait to be called upon, and respect each other.

- -If a particular student is out of line try the "teacher stare", sitting or standing near the student, or even placing a gentle hand on the desk (avoid touching) to remind the student of expected behavior.

- If the class is noisy, wait for quiet. Do not try to talk over them. After a few moments of your silence, they will get the hint.

- Specific praise is valuable! "Nice job!" "Excellent question!" "Super answer!" "That's an awesome drawing." "Good try!"

Implementation (Continued)

- Modeling is especially helpful because students are so eager to please. "I appreciate how quietly Jose is waiting!"
- Give clear, specific directions for all activities.
- Stickers or other small tokens are great motivators: "I have some stickers today for students who are being excellent listeners!"
- Be firm but have fun. Smile!
- Avoid fire department jargon (e.g. piece, bunker, apparatus, line)

Assembly Programs

Assembly programs are less desirable but can be a good conclusion to a series of classroom presentations (a wrap-up or graduation) or a way to get your foot in the door. Assembly programs can reach a large number of students or adults but have disadvantages in terms of audience participation and information retention. Studies have shown that we only retain 50% of what we see and hear.

Your biggest advantage in teaching fire safety is ... YOU. You are a firefighter. Some of the children may never have seen a real firefighter. It is likely they have been excitedly anticipating your visit. It certainly is a photo opportunity. The classroom teacher cannot possibly teach these lessons with the experience that a firefighter brings to the class. He or she may never have felt the heat or the water spray or seen the damage and devastation that fire causes as you have. The students may ask you questions about their safety that they might never ask their teacher or their parents. You are the expert. Your knowledge, stories, and experiences are unique. That is why a firefighter can be, and should be, the most effective fire and life safety instructor.

(seen on the wall in an elementary school)

"A hundred years from now
It will not matter
What my bank account was,
The kind of house I lived in
Or the kind of car I drove . . .
But the world may be different
Because I was important
In the life of a child."

- author unknown