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Public Sector & K-12 Education

WISCONSIN SCHOOL TALK

A Safety and Health Bulletin for K-12 Schools From Gallagher National Risk Control

Safety Committees for K-12 School Districts

The purpose of a safety committee is to bring employees and management together to achieve and maintain a safe, healthful workplace while reducing the total cost of risk for the school district. It is easy to start a safety committee, but developing an effective one—one that achieves and maintains a safe, healthful workplace—requires employees and managers committed to achieving that goal. School districts are unique in that they have so many different departments with different functions for public education. Therefore, it is imperative that all departments are included and participate in the safety committee.

Workplace Safety Committee

Starting or revitalizing a safety committee is not that difficult but, to be effective, you first need to accomplish the following:

- Begin with management commitment.
- Be accountable for achieving its goals.
- Involve employees in achieving its goals.
- Identify workplace hazards.
- Review reports of accidents and near misses.
- Keep accurate records of committee activities.
- Evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.

Open Meeting Requirements

The safety committee may be subject to the open meetings law and if so, should be posted in accordance with the open meeting law. If the committee was created by the school board, either through board policy or board action, it is subject to open meeting law requirements. Advisory committees, even if appointed by the superintendent or another local public official, may be subject to open meetings law depending upon how the committee is structured and who it reports to.

If school board members are participating members of the safety committee or attend as any other member of the public for a meeting convened in open session, this may constitute a special “dual meeting” notice to be provided. Any time board members engage in governmental business regarding a subject over which they have decision-making authority, two separate meetings occur.

You should also contact your district’s legal counsel to determine if there are other legal issues to be apprised of in creating such a committee, e.g., minutes of committee meetings, public records and school safety plan information.

Management Commitment

The committee will not survive without management support. Management demonstrates support by encouraging employees to get involved in creating a safe, healthful workplace and acting on the committee's recommendations. Representatives demonstrate commitment by attending committee meetings, following through on their assigned tasks and encouraging other employees to get involved in identifying hazards.

Accountability

Representatives should understand that the committee expects them to contribute; each representative shares responsibility for accomplishing safety committee goals, which benefit everyone who works for the school district. The committee is also responsible for monitoring how management holds employees accountable for working safely and recommending ways to strengthen accountability.

Employee Involvement

To be effective, a safety committee needs help from everyone who works for the school district. The committee must have a method for employees to report hazards and offer safety suggestions. Examples of this method may include safety suggestion boxes, a form on the school district website for reporting or the use of an answering machine to take safety concerns/suggestions. The ways the safety committee can get employees involved include:

- Encouraging employees to report hazards and unsafe work practices to a safety committee representative.
- Acting on employee suggestions and recognizing their contributions to a safe workplace.
- Promoting the committee's activities and accomplishments.

Make sure all employees know that you are starting or revitalizing a safety committee. Tell them why you are starting the committee, describe the committee's role in the school district's safety and health program and explain management's commitment to the committee. You can inform employees in a memo, newsletter or email—or better yet, meet with them to promote the committee and answer questions.

Hazard Identification

The safety committee plays an important role in keeping the workplace hazard-free.

- Ensure that representatives know how to recognize hazards and understand how to control them.
- Focus on identifying hazards and unsafe work practices that are likely to cause serious injuries.
- Conduct thorough workplace inspections at least quarterly.
- Document hazards during quarterly inspections and discuss how to control them at regular safety committee meetings.
- Include employer and employee representatives on the inspection team.

The committee must establish procedures for investigating workplace accidents, illness and deaths.

It is not necessary for the committee to conduct or participate in accident investigations; however, the committee should ensure that management does so. The committee should also carefully review accident reports to help management identify accident causes and determine how to control them.

Recordkeeping

You may not think of recordkeeping as an essential activity, but accurate, well-organized records document the committee's accomplishments and inform the committee about what it needs to do to improve. The following documents are required for the safety committee's file:

- Accurate minutes of each safety committee meeting.
- Committee reports, evaluations and recommendations.
- Management's response to committee recommendations.
- Documentation for both projected and actual completion dates for employee safety suggestions or hazard concerns.

Evaluation

Evaluation answers the question "Are we effective?" Effective safety committees periodically evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and the evaluation helps them set new goals. At least once a year, schedule a half-day safety committee meeting to identify the committee's achievements of the past 12 months, review essential activities and set goals for the next 12 months.

Membership

Membership in the school district safety committee is determined by the nature of the organization's operations. Usually, all department heads or someone they designate will serve as a representative on the committee. In some cases, each school will have a representative on the safety committee. When there are a large number of schools in a school district, it may be better to have representatives from specific departments and then one representative for all of the high schools, one for the middle schools and one for the elementary schools. The school district/risk safety manager may participate on the committee but should not be the chair of the committee. To ensure the committee covers all specialty areas, other employees, volunteers and special advisors like insurance professionals, firefighters or police officers may be invited to attend. The specific representative's roles on the committee and their responsibilities should include the following:

• Chair

- » Schedules monthly meetings
- » Develops agendas for meetings
- » Conducts monthly meetings

• Vice-chair

- » Assumes chair's duties when the chair is absent
- » Coordinates training for new representatives
- » Performs other duties assigned by the chair

• Recorder/scribe

- » Takes minutes at each meeting
- » Distributes copies of minutes to representatives
- » Posts minutes for other employees to review
- » Maintains the safety committee file
- » Keeps minutes and agendas on file for three years

• Other committee members

- » Report employees' safety and health concerns to the committee
- » Report accidents, near-miss incidents and unsafe workplace conditions to the committee
- » Suggest items to include in the monthly meeting agenda
- » Encourage employees to report workplace hazards and suggest how to control them
- » Establish procedures for conducting quarterly workplace inspections and making recommendations to management to eliminate or control hazards
- » Help management evaluate the school district's safety and health program and recommend how to improve it
- » Establish procedures for investigating the causes of accidents and near-miss incidents
- » Write a mission and goals

Develop a written policy or mission statement that clearly states why the committee was established and what it intends to accomplish. This mission statement should be posted throughout the school district to inform employees of the function. One of the most important functions of the safety committee is setting goals for the year. Not setting any goals is like the committee being a ship on the ocean without a sail. Goals should be attainable to keep the safety committee engaged in moving forward with their safety efforts but still impactful in protecting the school district's total cost of risk.

Training for Safety Committee Representatives

Representatives must understand the purpose of the safety committee and how to apply the safety committee rules and conduct safety committee meetings. They also must be trained in hazard identification and accident investigations.



Hold Regular Safety Committee Meetings

Each representative must participate.

Make sure representatives understand that they will be committing to attending monthly meetings and participating in committee activities.

Your committee must meet at least once a month.

Setting a regular time, date and place for meetings—for example, 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. on the first Tuesday of each month—makes it easier for everyone to remember.

Establish ground rules.

Ground rules keep meetings orderly and efficient. All representatives should understand the ground rules and the chairperson should enforce them.

- Keep the discussion focused on agenda topics.
- Listen to others and let them finish before responding.
- Cooperate to achieve effective solutions.
- Finish the meeting on time.

Follow a written agenda.

The agenda outlines the meeting's discussion topics. The chairperson should understand the agenda topics and keep the discussion focused on them. Send copies of the agenda to representatives a few days before the meeting so they can review it.

Take accurate minutes.

Accurate meeting minutes are important because they document the committee's accomplishments. The person who has this responsibility should be able to grasp the main points of a discussion and record them quickly. Minutes are the official record of the safety committee's activities, including accomplishments and recommendations to management. Meeting minutes should include the following:

- A brief summary of the discussion of each topic.
- A copy of committee reports, evaluations and recommendations.
- A copy of management's response to committee recommendations.

Send a copy of the minutes to each representative promptly after the meeting and post a copy where other employees can see it. You should send a copy to be posted at each department/facility. Keep a copy of each meeting's minutes on file for three years.

Start the meeting on time

Make sure the meeting room is ready; allow extra time if you need to set up tables, rearrange chairs or clean up after others have met. Before you get down to business, start the meeting on the right track by doing the following:

- Distribute the agenda. Make sure everyone has a copy of the agenda and any other handouts.
- Review the ground rules. You may not need to review the ground rules at every meeting, but consider doing so for the benefit of guests and new representatives.
- Make introductions. No one likes to feel left out at a meeting. Welcome new representatives and guests.
- Review the minutes from the last meeting. Ask if there are any additions or corrections to last month's minutes. Update the minutes to reflect the changes.
- Review the agenda topics. Give representatives and guests the opportunity to suggest changes or add discussion topics to the agenda.

Unless the representatives agree to continue the meeting, end it at the scheduled time. You can discuss unfinished items during the next meeting or later with concerned representatives. Before you finish, thank the guests for coming and schedule the next meeting.

A single risk manager or department head cannot begin to accomplish what a team is capable of doing. If properly structured and implemented, the safety committee will be effective. An effective safety committee for a school district can have a positive impact on communicating proactive safety activities, sharing management's commitment to safety, providing an outlet for employees to report unsafe conditions and creating a partnership with all departments and schools to keep employees and the public safe.

Connect With Us

Nancy Moon

P: 262.792.2240

E: Nancy_Moon@ajg.com