

# New York State School Safety Group 491 Safe Schools Agenda

## Route to:

Superintendent  
 School Business Off.  
 Athletic Director  
 Supt. Bldgs/Grounds  
 Site Administrators  
 Transportation Dir.  
 Lunch Director  
 Classroom Teachers

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*A monthly service provided to help you with your efforts to make your school safe for students, staff and the public*

## December Safety Reminders

December is a busy month in schools, with a big increase in evening events, special programs with visitors present during the day, and the creation and display of holiday artifacts. Following are a few safety reminders that can be used to refresh the awareness of all staff members.

**School fires:** An average of 5,500 structure fires occurs annually in schools. They are responsible for about 125 injuries, up to 5 fatalities and \$50.1 million dollars in property loss. In New York State during the period of 2000 to 2004, six public school buildings sustained fire damage in excess of \$27 million dollars. **The potential for a school fire increases during the holiday season because of the introduction of Christmas trees, expanded use of electrical cords, and the increase of paper mounted on classroom and hall walls.**

**Christmas trees:** The New York State Education Department permits only artificial Christmas trees that bear the Underwriter's (UL) label. Other states permit the use of both artificial and natural trees, but add safety standards for the mounting and care of natural trees.

Use only light leads made for the newer cool-burning miniature bulbs. They must contain an integral fuse in or near the male plug, and must also be UL labeled. Do not exceed the manufacturer's recommendations on the maximum number of lights that may be used in a combination of leads or that may be plugged into one outlet.

Don't use traditional glass ornaments. They can shatter on impact and cause injury.

Place the Christmas tree so that only a short extension cord is needed. Be aware of tripping hazards.

Do not place Christmas trees in corridors. When placing trees, keep areas of travel clear at all times, with no obstruction of the free flow of traffic.

Do not use untreated paper, plastics or natural tree boughs: they are fire hazards. Use only decorations that bear the UL label or are certified by the manufacturer to be flame resistant.

**Decorations:** Keep all displayed material at least 2 feet from ceilings and 10 feet from exit doors, including classroom doors

Displayed material must be directly mounted on noncombustible wall surfaces. Foam mounting boards are combustible, emit toxic vapors when ignited, and contribute to the spread of fire.

In New York State, do not let mounted materials exceed 20% of the noncombustible wall surface. This is important. Some jurisdictions recommend no more than 5%.

For added safety, artwork must be treated with a fire retardant.

**Assembly events:** Anticipate the potential for exceeding space occupancy and the need to keep exits and fire lanes clear. Work with local fire and police agencies to identify potential hazards and develop workable solutions.



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## The Case for Safety Mentors and Storytelling

These are the two most important insights contained in the report of a research project conducted by NIOSH, *“Tell Me a Story: Why Stories are Essential to Effective Safety Training”*. The project produced seven safety videos using miners to deliver their stories on the dangers inherent in their work, and lessons they had learned to keep themselves safe. At the beginning of the project, however, the researchers took lessons from research on adult learning behaviors. The comments below are taken from that knowledge base.

The “case” starts with the acknowledgement that adults learn differently than the ways that children learn. Adults are pragmatic in their learning. They will not put energy into learning that does not appear relevant to their lives. Adults need to know why they need to learn something, and they must be ready and motivated to learn. They have to see the training as valuable. ***“Their most memorable learning came from personal experiences, from working within groups of other adult learners, and from mentoring they received from someone they perceived to be both knowledgeable and wise.”*** (p.12)

This insight into adult learning is at odds with current safety training, which is all too often the talking-head variety, with the trainer in front of a classroom and the trainees sitting and listening passively. Adults in any working community are likely to be resistant to changes suggested by outside safety “experts”. They may change their behavior to comply with safety rules when a supervisor is watching, but when supervision is not taking place, they are likely to revert to their old habits.

experience, and they are generally admired and respected. They can play key roles in training and teaching new employees. They have stories to tell, they know what is important, how to do things right, and “how things are done around here”, including unsafe acts, unsafe conditions and unsafe omissions.

Mentoring of new employees by older employees takes place on an informal basis in every organization. Without direction, however, that mentoring will be exclusively in the “this is the way we do things around here” mode, including shortcuts and unsafe acts.

The effectiveness of mentoring of new teachers by seasoned teachers has been well established. What about the support staff? Why not officially assign a respected senior employee the responsibility of helping a new hire to understand the how’s and why’s of safety rules. Why not find ways for these senior employees to tell stories about their mishaps and near misses at safety meetings? Stories have great potential to influence behavior. They entertain, as well as show others what they would do when faced with a certain set of circumstances.

Tell me a Story: Why stories are Essential to Effective Safety Training. Elaine T. Cullen, Ph.D., and Albert H. Fein, Ph.D., August, 2005. See NIOSH web site [www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh).



**Have a Safe and Happy**

Mentors, on the other  
credibility because of their age and length of