

IS YOUR SCHOOL BUILDING FIRE SAFETY COMPLIANT?



Regular maintenance of a school's ventilation systems is essential for ensuring good indoor air quality, but of even greater importance is preventing the risk of fire. Darren Ling, a Director of the UK's leading air hygiene specialist, System Hygienics, explains.

Have you ever considered what might happen if a fire broke out in your school and travelled into your ventilation systems? Fire dampers are installed within ventilation systems to prevent ductwork conveying fire from one area to another. Without them, fire would spread through a ventilation system in a matter of minutes. To ensure a school building's fire dampers are operating effectively, regular safety checks are vital.

Fire safety obligations

Head teachers and facilities managers have a legal obligation to prevent the risk of fire within the buildings they manage under The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. The regulations state:

'Where necessary in order to safeguard the safety of relevant persons the responsible person must ensure that the premises and any facilities, equipment and devices provided in respect of the

premises under this Order...are subject to a suitable system of maintenance and are maintained in an efficient working order and in good repair.'

Inspection and maintenance

The British Standard 9999:2008 Code of Practice for Fire Safety in the Design, Management and Use of Buildings gives recommendations and guidance on the design, management and use of buildings to achieve acceptable levels of fire safety for all people in and around buildings, including schools. Under the topic of routine inspection and maintenance of air conditioning ductwork, BS 9999 says:

'Maintenance of air conditioning and ventilating equipment, including air filters, motors, fire dampers and their controls, smoke detectors and alarms, is of paramount importance both in preventing fire and in ensuring that measures taken to mitigate consequences are effective when needed.'

Risk Assessments

Before any maintenance work is carried out on a ventilation system, including the inspection of fire dampers, head teachers and facilities managers should assess the extent of any fire hazards involved and the potential effect of any fire on its

pupils, staff and the operation of the school. Precautionary measures should be taken where necessary and all building occupants and maintenance workers should be informed of the fire hazards identified and procedures required. This might include keeping fire escape routes clear at all times and making portable fire extinguishers readily available.

Legal requirements

BS 9999 goes on to say:

'Arrangements should be made for all fire dampers to be tested by a competent person on completion of the installation and at regular intervals not exceeding two years, and to be repaired or replaced immediately if found to be faulty. Spring-operated fire dampers should be tested annually and fire dampers situated in dust-laden and similar atmospheres should be tested much more frequently, at periods suited to the degree of pollution.'

If you are unsure when the fire dampers in your school's ventilation systems were last tested, you would be wise to check. Faulty fire dampers may not only prevent a school's ventilation system from working efficiently, they may also fail to prevent the spread of fire.

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