

Strengthen Your Risk Management Program with an Annual Audit

In Alberta, schools conduct annual audits to ensure safety programs are current and effective.

By Linden Lonsberry and Tom Strasburger

Anual safety audits—although time-consuming and often viewed as an added expense to an already shrinking budget—are beneficial for school safety planning. The data collected from an annual audit can act as benchmarks for the strengths and weaknesses of a safety plan and can highlight where systems need improvement. When a district or division knows what portion of its plan thrives and where it can improve, the evolution and improvement of the overall safety plan are a guided and educated process.

Alberta, Canada, provides a model for an advanced safety program, as schools are encouraged to conduct annual audits to ensure that current safety programs are adequate for guaranteeing both student and staff safety.

Conducting an annual audit is not mandatory, and sometimes not even customary, but it is a valuable way to improve school safety and it helps provide safer learning environments for students and staff. Considering Alberta's success with its audit program, districts in the United States and elsewhere might learn from this model.

The Alberta Audit

A full team of school professionals makes this annual safety audit program a success. The Alberta Safety Council, Alberta Human Resources and Employment agency, Alberta Association for Safety Partnerships, and a third-party consultant group all contribute their expertise to evaluate a division's school safety program. The auditing process is extensive and comprehensive.



The school safety audit covers the following areas: (1) management leadership and organizational commitment, (2) hazard identification and assessment, (3) hazard control, (4) ongoing inspections, (5) qualifications, (6) orientation and training, (7) emergency response, (8) accident and incident investigation, and (9) program administration. The school divisions are evaluated based on a set of questions, averaging eight per category, to gather information about the current strategies employed to meet standards.

The audit process includes an interview with senior school leaders, department leaders, supervisors, employees, and contractors to ensure that all parties involved in school safety have a chance to weigh in on their processes. To ensure consistency, the auditor receives instructions on how to ask questions, record answers, and score them. Having a common language and process for conducting audits ensures that all audits conducted in Alberta are rated consistently.

Acing the Audit

One school division that has continuously shined in audit reports is Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73 in Innisfail, Alberta. Chinook's Edge serves 13,000 students and employs 1,200 staff members. The division has 45 facilities that span 9,000 square kilometers, yet it has only one safety manager. With such a vast area to cover, it was nearly impossible for this one safety officer to physically visit all buildings for inspections and safety tasks, to manage staff and student incidents, to ensure completion of required training, and still to accomplish all the duties associated with being safety manager.

To address this issue, Chinook's Edge implemented a fully automated online risk management system in 2007 to help with its compliance and safety tasks.

Since then, Chinook's Edge has been awarded a certificate of recognition (COR) every year for its Occupational Health and Safety Program. Presented by the Office of Alberta Employment and Immigration, along with certifying partners, the COR includes an evaluation by a certified auditor that ensures that an organization's health and safety management program meets the rigorous COR standards. Chinook's Edge's COR status also earned it a financial incentive through Alberta's Workers' Compensation Board Partnerships in Injury Reduction program.

Chinook's Edge consistently receives high marks in accident and incident investigation, scoring 87% last year. The division credits its dedicated staff and the automated risk management system.

When a staff member or student is involved in an accident, staff members can easily report it using an online form. The form prompts the user to fill in all of the necessary details—cause of incident, associated hazards, witnesses, time of day, exposure to bodily fluids—for

a comprehensive investigation of the incident. Depending on the staff member's answers, the online form will automatically require more information so the investigator addresses the accident and is not trying to track down additional information. The form will not advance to the next page if a staff member neglects to answer a required question, even further ensuring that all important information is submitted.

Once the staff member submits the report, the system sends an investigator notice to the appropriate person and immediately alerts the safety manager of the accident. The report is documented in the division's online safety records and can be accessed at any time throughout the investigation process. This online record keeping allows the division to pull accident trend reports to analyze where and when an accident occurs and what conditions were contributing factors.

Combined with the automated notifications to staff to investigate incidents, to address hazards, or to retrain injured employees, the online records improve safety and reduce the chance of recurring or individual incidents—whether they are structural or related to an aspect of training.

Learning from Weaknesses

Although a COR award and financial incentives are major achievements, a safety program always has room for improvement. Safety programs and risk-reduction initiatives should evolve. From year to year, Chinook's Edge uses the results from its annual audit and data from the automated risk management system to amend its program for optimal results.

It was nearly impossible for this one safety officer to physically visit all buildings for inspections.

For example, numerous staff incidents involving slick surfaces during the winter months made Chinook's Edge management look for ways to enhance staff safety training. Chinook's Edge developed a Winter Walking Safety training program for staff. The training encouraged teachers to wear appropriate footwear during winter months and to take slow, small steps when walking on slick surfaces.

After developing the training program, Chinook's Edge was able to upload its online content to the automated risk management system and automatically assign it to staff members. The system automatically emailed employees to let them know they had new required training and directing them to an online site where they could take the course. The system also emailed the administration with reports that detailed which staff

members had not completed the training. In the three years since Chinook's Edge implemented the Winter Walking Safety program, only one staff incident involving slick surfaces has occurred.

Chinook's Edge also improved its safety procedures by revamping its ongoing building inspections strategy. In 2012, the division scored 65% in the ongoing inspections category of the audit. The audit commentary recommended that the division "ensure employees responsible for conducting inspections are aware of their responsibilities for completed or arranging for corrective actions to be completed in a timely manner" and "ensure that all deficiencies identified in the inspections are corrected and are followed-up on to ensure that the correction actions are appropriate."

In response, the division revised its inspection procedures and processes. Because Chinook's Edge is a large division with a small safety management team, visiting each site to conduct inspections was too time-consuming. Instead, it was more beneficial to train employees on the inspection process and how to fix any reported deficiencies.

The safety manager now uses the online system to send out the inspection requirement to individual schools so they may conduct their own inspections. To

make sure that they arrange for and complete the associated corrective actions, the system sends a follow-up email to ensure that the deficiencies observed during the inspection are addressed in a proper and timely manner.

This simple fix reversed the low marks for the ongoing inspections category. During this year's postaudit meeting, a health and safety consultant listed the division's ongoing inspections strategy as a strength of its safety program.

The Evolving School Safety Program

Tweaking the way school safety is addressed can allow for major advances in the long term. Chinook's Edge was able to achieve a COR and even financial incentives—two major accomplishments—by using data to realize and address its safety weaknesses. More important, the improvements that Chinook's Edge made provided a safer learning environment for students and staff.

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