



ON CAMPUS ACTIVITIES

Holiday Decorations, Parties and Food – Best Practices

Source: Keenan & Associates

The holidays are upon us once again and with this special time of year comes plenty of gatherings, food, and decorations throughout many school districts. Consequently, there needs to be an increased focus on what should be considered acceptable from a risk standpoint in planning for the holiday events at your schools.

Decorations and Trees

Decorating the classroom and office areas is certainly a huge part of the holiday spirit. However, we must be mindful in the decoration process. According to the statistics from the National Safety Council, hospital emergency rooms treat about 15,000 people from injuries such as falls, cuts, and shocks related to holiday lights, decorations, and natural cut trees. In addition, natural cut trees are involved in an annual average of about 400 fires annually, resulting in 20 deaths, 70 injuries, and more than \$15 million in property loss and damage. The Nation Fire Prevention Association reports that 12% of home candle fires occur in December.

- If displaying a tree in an office or classroom, it is recommended lights not be used to reduce the risk of fire. If light strands are used, be sure to use those for indoor use only and are UL approved.
- As a reminder, do not use multi-plug adapters. Power strips with a surge protector are a recommended alternative.
- Hanging decorations increase the risk of a fire spreading quickly across the classroom. Combustibles, such as paper products, should be kept at least 24 inches away from the ceiling, not suspended from the ceiling, and never on or blocking exit doors. A good rule of thumb is that walls should never exceed 50% coverage, but be sure local fire code standards are being followed and double check with risk management and M&O.
- Make sure the decorations you choose are flame retardant or flame resistant.
- Decorations should not block, or obscure exits, stairwells, emergency lighting, or EXIT lights, or be placed near any heat sources.
- Natural cut trees and wreaths are combustible, and difficult to maintain. The use of this type of holiday decoration is strongly discouraged. Artificial trees, and only those labeled as "Fire Resistant", "Flame Retardant", or similarly marked trees indicating that the material used to manufacture them, should be used on district grounds. Metallic trees, (those made with a tin foil type material), must not have electric lighting decorations attached. If Administration has granted you permission to use a natural cut tree or wreath on campus, PLEASE make sure the tree is set up at least 5 feet away from any heat source. Because heated rooms dry out live trees rapidly, be sure to keep the stand filled with water. Again, it is recommended that an artificial tree is used that is labeled fire resistant.
- Make sure your tree has a stable platform.

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- Holiday light sets that do not carry the UL (Underwriters Laboratory) or FM (Factory Mutual) seal of approval should not be used on district grounds or even at your home – even some UL approved units may fail and cause a fire, so make sure that you get Administration approval before hanging them up.
 - Holiday lights sets should also be labeled for indoor use only. Each light set, whether it is new or used, should be inspected for broken or damaged lamps, cracked sockets, kinked wiring, bare or frayed wires, and any loose connections. If damage is found, the set should be repaired, discarded, or returned to the seller.
 - Try to position holiday light sets near outlets so that extension cords are not running long distances. Do not overload electrical outlets or run extension cords under carpets, across doorways, or near sources of water or heat. Be sure extension cords are not pinched or underneath furniture. Extension cords should be unplugged at the end of each day.
 - Make sure holiday light sets are grounded properly and plugged into ground fault interrupter circuits – GFCIs.
 - Holiday or mood lighting – battery operated. Why? It minimizes or eliminates the risk of heat injuries or electrical fires (check with M&O professionals).
 - Remember to unplug holiday light sets at the end of the day and prior to making any repairs.
 - Avoid using chairs, tables, and counter tops when hanging decorations. Always use a safe step ladder for hanging decorations. Do not lean too far forward or to the side of the ladder. Always obey the “*Do not stand on or above this step warning.*”
 - Artificial snow sprays can irritate the lungs if inhaled. To avoid injury, read the container labels, do not spray when children are present. Remember to follow the label directions carefully.
 - Never use open flame candles in the classroom or office under any circumstances - no matter how wonderful the scent or fragrance.
 - Remember that weight is a hazard!! Do not try to lift more than you can handle. Ask for help if the load is too heavy or if it is an awkward shape.
 - When planning for a party, do not forget to ask for and use extra trash bags so that your Custodians can celebrate as well by having party trash already contained when they walk into the room.
 - Never overfill a trash bag. Use multiple trash bags. Keep the weight to a minimum to prevent back injury.
 - Decorations should be removed as soon as possible after the event for which they were used, and prior to the district closing for extended break periods.

Classroom Parties and Food

Every child loves to have parties and play games. The goal is to help students enjoy the holidays while reducing the risk of illness or injury. Make sure to receive authorization from the District Office and other appropriate departments for activities that may include food services, maintenance and operations, health services, etc. In additions, ensure that District policies and procedures are being followed.

- Maintain an updated list of food allergies for each student in the class.
- To reduce the risk of illness due to improper food handling, prohibit homemade items from being served to the class. Follow the District’s policy on bringing food into the classroom or office.
- A good bet is using the food services professionals. Why? Cooking standards are higher, and they know the ropes.

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- If heated beverages, such as hot cocoa, tea, etc. are served, be sure to use the same rule of thumb for warming an infant's milk. Why? If the liquid is hot to the touch, it is much too hot to give to a student. Check with District health or food service professionals for clarification and standards.
 - Parties should be all-inclusive so that every student, regardless of their background, will feel comfortable participating.
 - Maintain good housekeeping. Make sure all trash and food are disposed of prior to the school being closed for an extended period. You do not want to come back from your break to pests and spoiled food.
 - Help prevent injury to your custodian by frequently emptying cans with holiday trash. The holiday season is something both faculty and students look forward to. Over the years, the celebrations have become more conservative, as have many things in our schools, but appropriate risk management and giving schools a festive atmosphere around the holidays is something that can and does work well together.

Check with your Loss Control Advisor for clarification, if needed and always follow District policies and procedures.
Happy Holidays!