“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” is a common playground taunt. Children shout it with wild abandon, unafraid that the metaphor will come to fruition. After all, they regularly practice orderly escape drills in school classrooms, hallways and buses. How often do they actually experience a fire emergency firsthand?

While not as prevalent as childhood untruths, U.S. fire departments responded to an average 5,100 fires on educational properties annually between 2009 and 2013, 70% of which took place in K-12 locations. An estimated 20% of these fires, totaling $88 million in property damage, began in a school kitchen, reports the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

The good news is that there has not been a truly catastrophic K-12 fire (resulting in 10 or more deaths) since 1958 when a fire at Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago left 95 dead. Still, any fire has potential to cause tragedy, and one injury or death is one too many. NFPA reports that one-fifth of fires on educational properties that begin in a kitchen or cooking space cause 11% of injuries to civilians and result in an average of one death per year.

BEAT THE HEAT You know better than most that cooking in a foodservice kitchen, such as a restaurant or a school, is a different experience than cooking at home. Besides the drastic disparity in cuisine and yield, the basic environment and equipment also contrast. Still, one thing the two settings have in common is a number of risks for fire.

According to NFPA data, cooking/cooking equipment is the leading source of all home fires in the United States, as well as all the top cause of foodservice fires (see the graph at left). Heating equipment, electrical equipment, smoking materials and arson are other common causes of foodservice fires. A little more than one-third of all fires at educational locales are caused by cooking equipment.

Think of how you work in your kitchens at home or school; you probably believe you are meticulous in following protocols for reducing the risk of a fire, but you are only human and mistakes happen. It’s difficult to guard against every possible risk, and these can add up. Food left unsupervised for a few moments on the stovetop. Spilled grease you didn’t get a chance to clean. Dishtowel dropped too close to...
IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Most schools and districts have specific emergency procedures for all personnel to follow. It’s likely that they include calling 9-1-1 without delay. But do you know how to make that call most effective? The following guidelines are practical steps to take whether calling from work or home.

- Immediately dial 9-1-1.
- Be direct and to the point: Provide your name, location and the exact situation to the dispatcher.
- Answer all questions. Remain calm.
- If medical attention is needed, alert the dispatcher. Be prepared to describe symptoms and perform any instructions detailed to you.
- Tell the operator where you will meet the first responders, whether fire or EMS personnel. You don’t want to waste time when directing them to the appropriate location.
- Remember that the most important thing you can do when calling 9-1-1 is to listen carefully.
- If the situation changes significantly and responders have not arrived, call 9-1-1 again to relay new details.

DON’T GET BURNED

So, what can you do when arsonists, grease, electricity and birds conspire? Following are steps to take to reduce your risks for a fire emergency in a school nutrition setting.

1. How old are the facilities where you have full prep kitchens or even just re-therm equipment? New construction and renovations are usually held to a higher standard to meet current building codes, but if you oversee operations at sites that were around when you attended school, then you should confirm that these have automatic, up-to-date fire suppression systems in place.

2. Schedule regular maintenance check-ups for all kitchen systems. Cooking equipment is important to keep in top working order, but so are other areas of your operation. Get everything checked—electrical, refrigeration and exhaust, as well as fire suppression and extinguisher systems. It’s not uncommon for school nutrition operations to have kitchen equipment long past their prime. Work with maintenance personnel to review aging equipment specifically for fire risks.

3. Your school kitchen is required by different local, state and federal codes to have a certain number and type of fire extinguishers easily accessible (see the box below). Review where these are stored and ensure that all staff—including substitutes—are aware of their location and proper use.

4. Keep a clean, safe kitchen. Guard against built-up grease, particularly on exhaust hoods. Store chemicals and flammable liquids properly. Ensure that paper and fabric items are kept away from ranges. Dispose of trash, cardboard and similar flammable items properly.

5. Limit off-hours access to the kitchen and cafeteria to guard against potential arson. Make sure that there is little to attract a firebug that may get into the kitchen by keeping potential combustibles under separate lock and key.

6. Create a “Kitchen Fire Safety Training Plan” to use with staff at each

EXTINGUISH THAT!

Fires are not created equal. While your instinct may be to treat flames and smoke the same way every time, you can make the situation much worse. The source of a fire dictates how it’s treated. Fires have been classified into different categories based on how they combusted and the material that’s providing their fuel. Extinguishers have been developed to help combat various classifications of fire.

- **Class A**—These are caused by wood, cloth (such as dish towels), many types of plastic, etc. You can use almost any extinguisher, including water, to smother these ordinary combustibles.

- **Class B**—These fires are fueled by grease, flammable chemicals, oil and gas. Use a regulation ABC extinguisher or carbon dioxide. DO NOT USE WATER.

- **Class C**—Electrical equipment fires can be put out using either carbon dioxide or an ABC extinguisher. DO NOT USE WATER.

- **Class D**—Fires that involve combustible metals, such as magnesium and potassium, should be addressed with a metal extinguishing agent or sand.

- **Class K**—These high-heat fires involve combustible cooking media, such as vegetables, animal oils and/or fats.
individual site. Your plan should review causes, prevention, fire extinguisher use, 911 protocol, evacuation routes, treating minor burns and other first aid steps. Review this even with longtime staff at least once a year.

HEAT AND SERVE Have you ever participated in Fire Prevention Week activities? Sponsored by the NFPA, this observance runs Sunday, October 8 to Saturday, October 14 in 2017. If you’re looking for a way to both take the heat and stay in the kitchen, this is the way to do it. Organize and participate in various activities that will raise your own awareness about appropriate fire prevention steps and help you do the same among your staff and the students you serve.

Start by reaching out to your local fire department. Is someone there willing to come to your site and do a training with staff on how to identify and minimize risks, respond to an incident and treat a burn? Can they direct you to free resources with key information that you can share with staff or parents? Are these available in other languages besides English?

Work with the school principal to organize an activity to teach kids and staff about fire safety in general, as well as about being prepared for an emergency in the cafeteria. It’s important to convey this information without causing undue anxiety or fear. Ask firefighters and EMS personnel to act as special guest servers at lunch. Cafeteria staff members might don plastic red fire hats. With older students, use your menu to help get across the message: Serve up a spicy dish, encouraging them to enjoy “fiery foods without burning down the house.”

Is a fire in your school kitchen an eventuality? No. Like any disaster, it’s a possibility. So, just like tornado drills and packing down bags of sand before a hurricane, there are things you can do to minimize the risk and the potential consequences: Make sure to have a great fire safety plan, train your staff, maintain your equipment and take preventative measures. If disaster does strike, you’ll be ready. SN

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