

Allowable Number of Students in a Classroom

Inevitably each school year the question arises whether applicable building, fire or life safety codes limit the number of students that can safely occupy an elementary or secondary school classroom. The Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) typically receive several requests for information regarding this subject and recognizes that the issue is often the source of controversy and concern to school administrators, teachers' unions, parent interest groups, and elected officials. As a result, this document was prepared to offer a review of the code requirements specifically pertaining to educational classroom occupancy and egress. As is explained, the codes do not set predetermined limits on the number of students that can be accommodated in a classroom environment. Rather, the codes require that occupant loads be calculated based on the area of the classroom and prescribed occupant load factors and means of egress capacity in order to ensure that proper number and width of exits are provided from each classroom. The resulting occupant loads virtually never result in classroom occupancy limitations that even approach the lower numbers being discussed as reasonable by educators, teachers, or parents. In other words, the building, fire, and life safety codes applicable to Illinois schools will very rarely be used as the deciding factor relative to the maximum number of students that will be allowed in a classroom.

Applicable Codes

In accordance with Illinois statutes, public elementary and secondary schools outside of the City of Chicago are under the jurisdiction of the ISBE for building and fire code adoption and enforcement purposes. ISBE rules are found in multiple sections of the Illinois Administrative Code depending on when the school was approved for construction¹. Those rules reference various editions of the International Code Council (ICC) and the BOCA (Building Officials and Code Administrators) fire and building codes to govern school construction and fire safety. Also, for schools approved for construction prior to March 24, 1995, older versions of the ISBE Health/Life Safety Codes apply. These are commonly referred to as Part 185 and Part 175.

For private elementary and secondary schools located in municipalities that are not home rule, the Office of the State Fire Marshal's (OSFM) adopted Life Safety Code (LSC) is applicable. The LSC is published by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) as NFPA 101 and the State of Illinois has currently adopted and enforces the 2015 edition of the NFPA 101. For home rule municipalities the locally adopted code must be used.

For information on calculating occupant loads please use the link below (insert the link to our occupant load calculation website page)

[Calculating Occupant Loads in Assembly Occupancies \(illinois.gov\)](#)

Even though the link advises this information is for assembly occupancies the same process can be used for educational occupancies, using the appropriate occupant load factors for classrooms which is 20 ft² per person.

¹ (23 Ill. Adm. Code Parts 175, 180, and 185. Go to www.isbe.net to find Parts 175 and 185)

Contact information for OSFM and ISBE is found below:

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