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School Sidewalks & Parking Lots: Inspection, Maintenance, Clearing and Design

On January 4, 2013 the New York State Department of Transportation Commissioner announced $26.5 million in federal Safe Routes to School funding to implement infrastructure improvements and public education campaigns across the state to encourage elementary and middle school children to safely walk and bike to school. The commissioner stated, "The projects supported by this round of federal funding will help children get to school safely by providing features such as sidewalks, multi-use paths, crosswalks and pedestrian signals near schools."

Information about the NYSDOT Safe Routes program is available at the NYSDOT Website.[1]

Introduction

Students, staff and the general public use the sidewalks and parking areas on school property regularly. These areas are commonly involved in slips, trips, falls, vehicle accidents and pedestrian injuries. Ongoing inspection, maintenance and clearing of these areas can help reduce the potential for accidents and injuries in highly used areas surrounding a school.

Maintenance of the sidewalks, driveways and parking areas are important to support the following:

- Orderly and unimpeded evacuation of school buildings.
- Quick and easy access for emergency vehicles responding to an incident at the school.
- Safe separation and control of student walkways from vehicle traffic.
- Access to the school for all members of the community.
- Controlled, well marked and orderly flow of staff, students, vendors and community members who are visiting the school.

Consider the following when designing a sidewalk:

- A level, hard surface that provides continuous and accessible mobility for pedestrians around the building.
- Creating an area between the street and the sidewalk as a buffer zone to provide space between pedestrians and motor vehicles.
- The preferred minimum sidewalk width, recommended for safe routes around schools, is five to six feet[2]. Walking is a social activity; a wide path allows for people to walk comfortably side by side while providing sufficient space for pedestrians crossing in the opposite direction. Additionally, there are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for sidewalk design[3].
- While concrete is the most common sidewalk material, other construction materials may be acceptable but may require more maintenance. Sidewalks can be surfaced with a variety of materials that are firm, stable and slip-resistant. While urban, suburban and heavily used sidewalks are typically made of concrete, less expensive walkways may be constructed of asphalt, crushed stone or other materials.

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Parking Lots

School parking lots can be high risk areas especially at the busy times of arrival and dismissal. Some considerations include:

- Limit and clearly identify areas where pedestrians cross vehicle traffic using curbs, fencing and gates to minimize entry points[4].
- Provide clear signage to direct traffic flow.
- Provide crossing guards at high traffic/pedestrian intersections.
- Separate student, staff and visitor parking areas to channel individuals to their designated entrances and manage parking space allotments[4].
- Provide adequate bicycle parking that is secure and separated from vehicle traffic areas[4].

Inspection and Maintenance

Monitoring sidewalks and parking lots by the school buildings, grounds, custodial and school staff helps identify conditions that could lead to accidents and injuries. Inspection supports the safe interaction of vehicles, pedestrians, wheelchairs, strollers and bicyclists. Solicit ongoing feedback from parents, school officials and students to assist in monitoring sidewalk conditions.

Properly maintained sidewalks and parking lots support pedestrian safety and reduce the potential for accidents, injuries and vehicles damage. Consider the following:

- Schedule major sidewalk and parking lot repairs for the summer or school vacations when there is less use of the school facilities. Minor maintenance may be performed on an ongoing basis as the need arises.
- Repair sidewalks and parking lots before the start of the school year and following any renovations or construction.

Inspection and maintenance of the sidewalks and parking lots can reduce the potential for accidents and injuries. The attached checklist provides some items to consider during inspections.

Cleaning: Snow/Ice

Once a school district has made the decision that the facilities will be open during inclement weather, it is imperative that the vehicle and pedestrian areas on the school property are cleared of ice and snow to reduce the potential for slips, falls and vehicle accidents. This requires both flexibility and planning so adequate resources are available prior to the arrival of students, staff and visitors. Some considerations include[5]:

- Define the roles and responsibilities of the custodial and buildings and grounds staff for each school and administrative building. Establish a written procedure on who and how they will attempt to reasonably remove snow and ice from sidewalks and parking lots. The procedure would detail who is responsible for removing the snow from specific areas such as custodians being responsible for most sidewalks adjacent to their building and the maintenance department responsible for removal in parking lots and outlying sidewalks. Include the duties of snow removal in an employee's job description so there is not confusion about who is expected to perform the work.

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• Based on the flow of traffic and visitors to a school, the policy should clearly identify which schools and which areas at each school should be cleared first. The primary consideration is for the safety of drivers, buses and pedestrians who are accessing the main entrances to the buildings. Typically, the schools that open the earliest are a higher priority. Additional considerations include enrollment size, special needs access, planned special events and the topography of the site and drainage of the specific facilities. Identify the staff positions responsible for maintaining and using the specific equipment. Ice melt should be available and provided in areas of high traffic.

• Monitoring weather forecasts and district communications are important so the proper staff and equipment are available in advance of the storm. Flexibility in work schedules and the ability to approve overtime is also important in order for the appropriate staff to be available in advance of, during and after a snow storm.

• Before plowing a school parking lot, think about the location of speed bumps, dumpsters and raised manholes and how they will impact plow operations.

• Furnish enough shovels, salt and sand before a snowstorm.

• Install plows on trucks in advance of the storm. Encourage facilities staff to wear proper footwear when working outside and remind all staff to wear sensible shoes in slippery weather conditions.

• After the winter, sweep outdoor areas to remove excess sand and cinders to reduce slippery conditions.

• Clean up sidewalks and parking areas to reduce hazards, such as overflowing playground gravel or debris from trees in walking areas.

Conclusion

The exterior of a school requires careful thought to provide safe sidewalks, roads and parking lots for community members, building occupants, visitors and neighbors. Ongoing inspection, maintenance and clearing of these areas can help reduce the potential for slips, trips, falls, vehicle accidents and pedestrian injuries in these highly used areas surrounding your school.

References:

1. New York State Department of Transportation. NYSDOT Announces Safe Routes to School Funding Awards for Towns and Cities Across New York, Press Release, 1/4/2013

2. National Center for Safe Routes to Schools. Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center, Safe Routes to School Online Guide (SRTS Guide), Sidewalks; saferoutesinfo.org

3. Americans with Disabilities Act, Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities. US Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, Accessible Route, Section 4.3.3

4. National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, Assessment Guide: School Grounds and Site Access Control, see Section 9, Traffic Circulation (page 6-7)

5. Glatfelter Public Practice Risk Communiqué, "Snow Removal Policy for Schools"

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Self-Inspection Checklist

Question	Yes	No	N/A	Comment(s)
Are sidewalks and lots level?				
Are tree roots impacting sidewalks or lots?				
Are tree and shrubbery debris causing a hazard to walkers?				
Are trees/branches cut back to provide clear passage for pedestrians?				
Are trees and bushes cut back to provide visibility at corners/intersections?				
Are stop signs needed as vehicles exit and enter school property?				
Are exterior lights working properly?				
Is lighting adequate to illuminate high traffic areas at night?				
Are steps even and handrails provided?				
Are gas meters, above ground fuel tanks, and electric transformers protected from vehicle contact?				
Do puddles indicate drainage improvements are needed?				
Do arrows and signs clearly indicate traffic flow on campus?				
Are one way areas labeled?				
Are areas marked off-limits as needed (e.g., playground)?				
Are areas free of snow and ice?				
Are potholes repaired promptly?				
Are crosswalks provided in high pedestrian areas?				
Are parking spaces clearly indicated?				
Are parking spaces for visitors and the disabled clearly marked?				
Would additional signage improve traffic flow?				
Are there any hills, ponds, or other drop off areas that need to be more clearly separated from vehicles?				
Are curbs painted appropriate colors and in good condition?				
Are ramps provided to assist those with deliveries, strollers, or wheelchairs?				