

When Your Schoolhouse Burns!

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As a child, I looked forward to the Victoria Day (May 24) holiday for a couple of reasons. First, it meant a day off school, and second, I could watch the schoolhouse burn. Back in the day, the Victoria Day holiday was unofficially referred to as “Fireworks Day” because a loud and colourful display of fireworks was the day’s grand finale in most small Ontario towns. My town invested significant funds into the Victoria Day display, and I made sure I was there to see it. After the sparklers, and the “bangers” and the other impressive fireworks, the last to go off was “The Schoolhouse.” As children, we cheered and clapped as we watched it burn in what, to us, was a spectacular display. Then we headed home so we could go to real school the next day.



In the late afternoon of Friday, July 4, 2008, a real schoolhouse burned. Nobody clapped or cheered. For those of us looking on as the Peel Adventist School in Brampton burned, the mood was sombre. Eight fire trucks, several emergency vehicles, a number of police cars with flashing lights, newspaper reporters, and an assorted variety of onlookers looked on silently. In some ways the quietness was almost eerie, as we watched firemen in several “cherry pickers” hose down the already collapsed roof. Across the street, Peel School teachers huddled together for comfort and prayer, trying to make meaning from what was happening before their eyes. All the teachers’ accumulated favourite teaching “stuff” was gone, and I was saddened to think of a career’s worth of teacher materials--for each teacher--gone up in flames.

Our fire, which was of a “suspicious nature,” fits the school fire profile. The leading cause of school structure fires is incendiary/suspicious activity, which accounts for 37% of all school structure fires. Of those fires, more than half occur outdoors, generally starting with refuse or other items of little value. (This was the case in the Peel fire.) Electrical fires are the next most common source and account for about 13% of incidents. Peak month for school fires is July, with more than half of all school fires occurring between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Summer is presumably the peak time for fires because few school staff are on-site.¹

Although we practice fire drills regularly and try to operate our schools in a way that will lessen the negative effects of such a loss, we usually don’t expect to have to put into motion the required measures that follow a fire. For whatever it is worth, here is a look at some of the pre- and post-fire measures that we took – or wished we had taken.

1. Keep all student academic records, money, and other important documents in fire-proof file cabinets. These cabinets are expensive, but worth it.

¹ All statistics are U.S. Retrieved from <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/downloads/pdf/tfrs/v4i6.pdf> . (School Fires, Topical Fire Research series, Vol. 4 (6), December 2004.)

2. If your school appears to be in a “high risk” area for vandalism or theft, invest in recording cameras placed at strategic locations. Our school had “real time” cameras only. Although recording cameras would not have prevented the fire, they would have helped locate those responsible for this “fire of a suspicious nature.”
3. Be sure that your building is insured for a generous replacement cost, loss of business, etc. Conference administrators should re-evaluate these aspects of insurance every few years since real estate values can change quickly.
4. Meet with parents/teachers/students to help them grieve and to restore confidence for the future. A wonderful graduation celebration had just been held 14 days before the fire. The school’s clientele were understandably upset and even in shock by this latest development. A meeting held by Conference and school administrators about 10 days later at a nearby Adventist church was crowded with concerned parents.
5. Ensure that professional help is available to help students deal with the loss. A week after the meeting described above, an Adventist social worker met with the school’s children to help them make the emotional adjustment and bring closure to the tragedy at “their” school.
6. Let book companies and your public school district know when disaster has struck. Generous donations and waived fees were extended to the school’s staff as they approached various entities. Cartons of brand new books were donated by Scholastic, etc.
7. Expect miracles. Even when apparent tragedy has taken place, God is still in control. We thanked God that the fire occurred when it did (a week AFTER school was finished instead of a week before a new school year . . . or, worse yet, during the school year). We also thanked God for the man who, at the scene of the fire, approached our supervising principal and told him of a brand new building just a few minutes away that could be available for rent. The man was the youth pastor of a Sunday-keeping congregation that was looking for renters for their almost-finished place of worship which included a gymnasium and Sunday school rooms.

And that’s where the Peel Adventist Elementary School, with five teachers and an increased enrolment, is today. The journey continues but, for now, we are grateful.