

Blocking school exit doors puts children at risk

BY DICK STARTZ
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UNCHAIN Seattle schools! You see, it is the practice of the Seattle School District to use heavy chains to lock exit doors from the inside at various hours of the day and night. In case of fire, no child could force the doors open. For that matter, no adult could force the doors open.

Perhaps this sounds overly melodramatic, but chaining shut fire exits, putting children at risk, is so stunningly idiotic that strong words are warranted.

Let me be precise about what I know. First, I'm a public-school parent. I have not made a scientific survey of all Seattle schools. I have frequently been inside three of them, an elementary, middle school and a high school, for all the usual reasons that bring a parent to visit school.

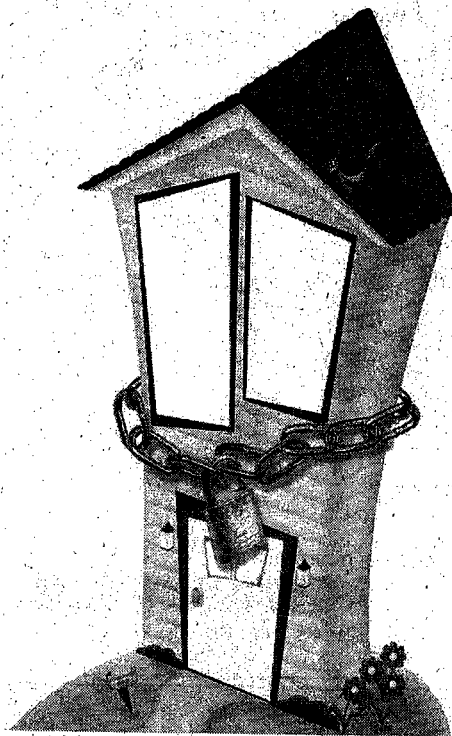
Picking up my daughter from a program at school this summer, I was at first amused that the kids' favored exit method was to open a window and jump out. Hearing the explanation that the nearby doors were chained shut ended my amusement, and made me realize that, like most parents, I just take fire safety for granted.

Thinking back in time, here's what I have observed over more than a decade:

- During scheduled activities outside of regular school hours, some exits are unchained, others are chained and impassable. Sometimes, most exits are chained, sometimes not.

- During times when a school is lightly populated, most exits are chained shut.

It is safe to lock people out of a public building. It is not safe to lock people in.



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People need to leave a building when the building is burning.

Here's the nub of the problem. Schools have good reasons for not letting people into a building. There's after-hours theft; and nowadays, sadly, we don't want adults to have access to classrooms without first checking in at the school office.

Door locks are supposed to permit easy exit while preventing entry. We've all seen the "panic bars" found on practically every door of every public building. The doors can be locked or not on

the outside. Either way, just a push on the bar opens the door from the inside.

Unfortunately, some school building doors are old and the panic bars are no longer secure. Chaining the doors shut may be a convenient fix, but it's still a bad idea.

There are circumstances under which chaining the doors does comply with the fire code. There are complicated rules involving how many people are in the building, whether all or part of a building is in use, and how many exits are left unchained.

Frankly, the staff in individual schools are experts in education. They shouldn't be expected to know the fine points of the fire code.

To be on the safe side, dump the chains. Unchaining doors is not a hard call.

The School District knows about the situation — it has been brought to officials' attention — and the central administration is working to reduce risks. The district is moving in the right direction.

In the meantime, if you're a parent, or a teacher, or just a visitor to a school, there's something you can do to help. If you see a door or a locked gate that would be unsafe in case of a fire, pick up the phone and report it to the district office or to the Seattle fire marshal.



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