

# **Audit critical of state's school inspection agency**

**Auditors found 70 violations in 10 school construction projects they inspected.**

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**DENVER** - Some of the state's newest schools were never properly inspected, according to a scathing audit released Monday of the agency that oversees school construction.

The audit revealed that not only were several schools in the state allowed to open without proper inspections, but that officials from the Division of Oil and Public Safety that is charged with conducting the inspections weren't even going to schools that took too long to get to from their Denver office.

Although there was no evidence that the lack of inspections had endangered school children, Don Mares, executive director of the Colorado Department of Labor & Employment under Gov. Bill Ritter, said his office has already taken steps to rectify the situation.

But Mares, a former Denver auditor himself, said more needs to be done.

"I see this as an opportunity to examine how we're doing business," Mares told the Legislative Audit Committee. "Everything's on the table. The whole division needs to be examined on how it's structured."

Mares said that many of the problems with the division stem from budget cuts that affected all of state government during the recent recession, when former Gov. Bill Owens was forced to cut state agencies across the board.

As a result of those cuts, the division only had one person on hand to inspect 150 to 200 new schools or renovations to existing ones.

Still, division director Dick Piper said he was "disappointed" with the main inspector who had allowed schools to open before completing a final inspection, and signed off on other projects without giving them a thorough check.

Of 10 school construction projects auditors looked at after they had been issued certificates of occupancy, they found 70 code violations, including failure to properly construct fire walls, classifying full basements as crawl spaces, and missing sprinkler systems and smoke detectors.

The audit, which issued 21 specific recommendations, did not identify the inspector or the schools it looked at.

In the audit, which was conducted between January and November of 2006, the division:

- Issued occupancy certificates to schools before they were completed, including some that had just started to be constructed.
- Did not inspect projects that were too far from Denver.
- Hired an inspector who was skilled on issuing permits for boilers, but not school buildings.
- Weren't sure which inspections it was required to conduct.

The audit also revealed that the division didn't have sufficient funding to hire enough inspectors, and the sole one it did hire didn't have time to go to remote parts of the state.

"According to the division, due to its limited staffing resources, its inspector will not spend more than a day conducting any building inspection, including the time it takes to travel to the building site," the audit reads. "This means that public schools in some parts of the state . . . have not typically received any inspections by the division."

Mares said the division has since hired a more experienced inspector, but still plans to seek other changes to allow it to hire more.

He said he might even consider raising building inspection fees, which the audit showed were far lower than similar fees charged by local governments.

Mares and Pipers also said the division was in the process of reviewing all the schools covered in the audit to ensure they meet code.

Mares also said he wanted to look into establishing a system that would allow the division to contract with inspectors who work for local cities and counties.