

## Firefighters Cheer Audit Bashing Oversight

The Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association says it has been pressing for change since at least 1997.

By Mark P. Couch, Denver Post Staff Writer  
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Colorado firefighters have been ringing alarms for at least a decade about the state's failure to properly inspect public- school construction projects.

But their efforts were quashed by bureaucrats who preferred the existing system, said Paul Cooke, executive director of the Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association.

"We have tried in the past to bring attention to the issue," Cooke said. "It's unfortunate that no one paid attention until this audit was released."

Earlier this week, the state auditor released a highly critical report of the state agency in charge of ensuring safe construction of public schools.

That report found that a staffer with 1 1/2 years of experience was in charge of all 150 plan reviews conducted each year. While large construction projects can entail up to 200 inspections, the state's review of schools was typically limited to two inspections.

In 2005 and 2006, the fire chiefs pushed for changes that would beef up the inspection of school construction projects.

A 2005 bill called for transferring the responsibility from the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to the Colorado Department of Public Safety. It died in committee.

That proposal had been part of the fire chiefs' agenda since 1997.

The Department of Labor and Employment includes the Division of Oil and Public Safety, which conducts the reviews of school construction projects.

"We brought forward the problems in committee hearings," Cooke said. "They were pooh-poohed. They were not listened to."

The chiefs said they reported incidents of faulty construction, including a case where emergency-exit doors were hung backward, meaning that students could be trapped inside a burning building.

"We've been lucky that (a fire or collapse) hasn't occurred with kids in the building," said Cooke.

"The Division of Oil and Public Safety absolutely considers the safety of public-school children of paramount importance, and our statutory responsibility is not one we take lightly," said Cher Roybal Haavind, a department spokeswoman.

The 2006 legislation transferred some authority to the Department of Public Safety - depending on rules adopted by the labor department. That department has yet to write those rules, the chiefs said.