

Report assails school checkups

The state auditor's office criticizes a Colorado agency for failing to properly inspect public schools under construction for safety violations. Such negligence puts schoolchildren at risk, the audit says.

By Mark P. Couch Denver Post Staff Writer
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The state agency in charge of ensuring safe construction of public schools has repeatedly failed to properly inspect projects - a key finding in a "scathing" report issued Monday by the state auditor's office.

In one case, that agency - the Colorado Division of Oil and Public Safety - even gave permission to occupy a school building before construction was completed.

Such mistakes put the lives of children at risk while hanging a potentially huge legal cost over the head of state taxpayers, the auditor concluded.

Lawmakers on the Legislative Audit Committee assailed state officials for the failings exposed by state auditors.

Rep. Victor Mitchell, R-Castle Rock, said, "I can't think of an audit more scathing than this one."

Sen. Nancy Spence, R-Centennial, said she was shocked that safety of schoolchildren could be at risk.

Don Mares, executive director of the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, said he will use the audit as a catalyst for changing the agency, which is part of his department.

"This (report) will not go on the shelf as long as I am the executive director," said Mares, who inherited the problems when he took over the department earlier this year.

Among the auditor's key findings:

A staffer with less than a year and a half of experience in enforcing building codes was the only person at the agency in charge of reviewing the 150 public-school construction projects per year.

Most large projects like a school require about 200 inspections, including follow-up reviews when violations are found. But typically the agency has been conducting just two inspections per project.

The agency should develop and use standard checklists for inspections to ensure that it is checking potential violations. The division reported it does not use the checklists that it currently has.

Many schools were not adequately inspected in all areas. Of seven schools checked by the auditor, four were not fully inspected. In some of those cases, the division inspector "was not able to access some parts of the building during the inspection

because the schools were already occupied by students and staff or because the areas to be inspected were covered with snow."

The audit did not include the names of the schools.

State officials blamed a lack of staffing.

"We obviously can't do it with one person," said Dick Piper, director of the Division of Oil and Public Safety.

Mares said the department will initiate a top-to-bottom review of the program, evaluating whether the division belongs in his department and looking for ways to make the division more efficient.

Mares noted that the state's fee for conducting inspections of school construction projects is significantly less than in communities that handle the reviews themselves. Three cities - Aurora, Denver and Grand Junction - handle their own inspections.

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