

# Scathing Report on New School Inspections

By April M. Washington, Rocky Mountain News

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The state is doing an abysmal job inspecting school construction projects for building code and safety violations, potentially putting students at risk, an audit released Monday found.

The Division of Oil and Public Safety has one person to review building plans and one to conduct inspections for about 150 public school construction projects annually.

State auditors found that in a number of cases the division issued certificates of occupancy - giving schools a green light to open new buildings - without conducting final inspections.

Don Mares, executive director of the Department of Labor and Employment, which oversees Oil and Public Safety, called the audit's findings unacceptable.

"This (audit) will not go on the shelf," he said. "We will come up with a plan to address it in a systemic way."

Auditors would not give a reporter the names of the schools, saying the problem lay with the state's building inspection process, not the schools.

A review of 10 completed school construction projects found that none of the schools received all of their required inspections.

Dick Piper, director of the division, blamed part of the problem on a lack of resources. Piper contends that newly constructed schools are safe.

Most local governments and schools conduct building inspections of all construction projects, he said.

"It's not as though thorough attention isn't being paid to safety by the folks overseeing the projects," he said.

Nevertheless, Piper said he was concerned by some findings.

"The one that's most disturbing is that fact that we issued certificates of occupancy for no justifiable reason," he said. "The excuse was that most were issued last summer when we got hit with a barrage of requests from schools because they wanted to get them open."

The division, which also inspects oil storage tanks and carnival rides, charges schools very low inspection fees. Some suggested the fees be raised.

## Report highlights

The audit found the Division of Oil and Public Safety:

- Issued certificates of occupancy to schools that had not received a final inspection by the state.
- Failed to identify 17 building code violations at two schools, including a classroom that did not have the required number of exits.

- Approved faulty building plans, including one for a school administration building that should have had an automatic sprinkler system but didn't.
- Hired an inspector trained in boiler inspections but not in school building inspections.