WATER DAMAGE MITIGATION

Water damage from burst pipes, overflowing sinks, windblown rain penetration, and street flooding can shut down an entire school for prolonged periods and is a cause for health concerns from those who occupy the buildings. It is crucial for school districts to try to prevent and take steps to mitigate water damage.

Property losses due to water damage are one of the leading causes of loss for many insurance companies and some of the costliest claims experienced by schools. In many cases, these losses can easily climb into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. These costs are driven by damage to property and contents as well as business income and extra expense losses. Then there are the hidden costs of water damage, costs not covered by insurance, such as lost time, loss of the community's confidence in the district, and the stigma of mold – which always accompanies water damage.

Time is critical when water is pouring out of a ceiling due to a burst pipe or failed fitting. When it happens at night, how does anyone know? When your internal first responders (Maintenance or Administration) show up at 2:00 AM in the morning, will they know where to go to shut off the water? Do they know the location of the main water shut off, the shut off valve location for that specific wing, what ceiling tile to access to get to a shut off hidden in the ceiling; and, do they have the keys needed to access locked mechanical room doors?

FOR WATER DAMAGE PREVENTION AND MITIGATION, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

Planning

Develop a written plan as part of your emergency planning process that identifies and maps out the location of all of the key critical (domestic and sprinklers) water shut offs. Make sure the plan identifies what is needed to access the locations, e.g. keys and ladders, describes the shut offs and how to close them, and provides a close up picture of the shut offs to show them in detail and a zoomed out picture to show their relative position to other objects at the locations. Label all shut off valves with a tag that indicates what location it controls so responders can identify quickly and easily which valve to close. When possible, critical equipment should be raised off of the floor to minimize the impact of flooding or the release of uncontrolled water.

Training

Has training been provided to responders on the written plan, the locations of shut offs, how to shut off the valves, and when NOT to shut off valves (e.g. do not turn off sprinkler valves in the event of a real fire).

Preventative Maintenance

Make sure that your school district's preventative maintenance program calls for detailed and regularly scheduled repair, replacement, and proactive inspections of the plumbing system done by qualified in-house and contracted professionals.

Self-Inspections

When completing self-inspections of the schools, identifying, reporting, and immediately acting on signs of water damage is crucial. The longer water flows uncontrolled, even drip by drip, the greater the future impact of the water damage. Even a small leak can be an indicator of a future major failure leading to a large water loss. Consider these general water damage mitigation items to place on a self-inspection list: leaks, malfunctioning faucets or water dispensers, and stained ceiling tiles; water shut off valves are accessible and labeled with identification tags; roof covering, flashing, drains and gutters in good condition; and broken windows, poor caulking, and EIFS in poor condition.

Water Sensors

Examine the feasibility of installing water sensors in areas where a broken pipe, failed fitting, or running faucet is most likely to happen and could cause the most damage. Water sensors can be tied into building control systems or central station alarms to notify someone before major damage occurs.

Summary

Even in the face of budget constraints, staffing shortages, and simply getting service companies to respond, school districts should be able to pick and choose from a few of the water mitigation techniques above and put them into play. Even if it's just labeling shut offs and placing more emphasis on looking for signs of water damage and identifying potential problems during self-inspections. If you haven't worked through major water damage in your school, is it because of luck or because of your school's aggressive mitigation efforts? If you have worked through water damage in one of your buildings, you know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

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