

Public Comments for School Board Meetings

#410

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Alex Sprague

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I know I didn't go to school in ACPS but when it comes to SRO's we absolutely must be careful what we wish for!
<https://neuroclastic.com/autism-fire-alarms-school-fire-drills/>

To top that off, I didn't find out til just last year that I was allowed to report that officer for that. We have to do better with training and our staff cannot be playing discriminatory mind games with our students.

It's one thing to tell a joke, it's another thing to play constant jokes on our brains that overstimulate just from certain words.

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Article Source: <https://neuroclastic.com/category/resources-for-educators/>

Autism, Fire Alarms, & School Fire Drills



Where I come from, the law requires my school to do frequent so-called fire drills.

Good thing to do, right? Disaster preparedness? Well, not exactly. Don't get me wrong, one needs to know what to do should the school catch on fire. But ringing alarms so loudly could be overwhelming to the senses, especially for autistic people and others with sensory processing disorder.

All these years that I've been in school, or any place where an alarm bell was near me, I would get so paranoid that it would suddenly blare— and even school counselors agreed that I never know when it could happen— without realizing the seriousness of the trauma I was experiencing.

The school staff's reasoning for making alarms as loud as they are is that people with Alzheimer's can't hear them otherwise. No disrespect to those with Alzheimer's, but is that really an excuse to make them scream so loud in a children's school?

Paranoia and Fear About Fire Alarms

Taking it back to what I said about paranoia, absolutely nobody I spoke to about my anxiety and fear of the drills recognized or understood the extent that the fear of a fire alarm impacted my mental health and ability to focus.

It was interfering with my work because every time my teacher was speaking, my fear and feelings of anxiety about an alarm interrupting the lecture were the most brutal. For some reason, during class instruction was the moment when the post traumatic stress hit hardest.

In hindsight, I realize I feared that if I let down my guard enough to focus on the teacher, then the jarring shock of the alarm would be even more traumatic. I was constantly on alert, trying to be prepared for the sound.

That heightened awareness [known as hypervigilance] has led to me missing some important instructions, and then my teachers would scream me out for not paying attention.

Hey, I don't make the laws!

Trauma Associations from Fire Drills

Even away from school, my intense feelings about the possibility of a fire drill impacted me. The two words *fire* and *drill* said together ended up boiling my blood whenever I heard them spoken... or even just the word *drill*. (Which kind of defeats the whole purpose of a drill).

Our school resource officer then started playing jokes on me by tricking me into thinking there'd be a fire drill, when in fact there wouldn't be one that day. That was embarrassing. Professional officers aren't supposed to rub salt in one's wounds, especially if that someone doesn't commit crimes.

I didn't confront her until the the last day of school when we all got sno-cones, and she asked why I didn't give her one. I then brought up her joking about the fire drills and how much it impacted me and my ability to learn.

But the damage was done. I had learned to fear the alarms far more than I felt a fear of a fire happening in the school. I still battle paranoia in my new apartment with an alarm next to my bedroom door.

Looking into Alternatives for Less Traumatic Fire Drills

I have considered a few potential alternatives. There is already a code set out by the National Fire Protection Association for how loud fire alarms must be, and it is determined by the maximum noise in a building at any time. Alarms must be 15 decibels louder than the ambient sound of a building or 5 decibels above the maximum sound. They are also required to have flashing lights for alerting people who are deaf.

In a factory with a lot of heavy machinery, the sound level would likely be set to the highest decibel rating; however, those employees are often already wearing ear protection. In a quiet apartment complex or office building, the sound level would be much lower.

In a school, the volume is dramatically varied. For example, there is a major difference between a classroom during an exam and a gym during a pep rally or a band room during practice.

So, here are some ideas for making fire drills less stressful. While I don't think these will eliminate stress, they may be helpful and make schools more inclusive for disabled students and staff. These may involve technology upgrades or approval from the local fire marshal.

1. Set the decibel level louder in gyms, band rooms, and the cafeteria and lower in classrooms.
2. Measure the volume of the loudest part of the school during the most busy hour and set the alarm no higher than it needs to be.

3. Begin the alarm with a quiet sound or with lights only that gradually becomes louder over the course of a few seconds to give students time to protect their ears. This will also reduce how jarring and startling fire drills can be during instruction.
4. Gain approval from the [fire marshal](#) for reducing the sound level of fire alarms where a visual system would be adequate to alert people of the need to evacuate.
5. Switch to a voice-signaling system so evacuation can be directed over the PA system.

None of these are complete solutions, but for autistic students to have access to a free and appropriate education, they need to be able to learn without the fear and trauma of a fire drill. It is a human rights issue when it can cause PTSD and prevent access to learning.