

SAFETY NOTICE

Using Tents as Classrooms

The pandemic has required people to alter how they approach life on a daily basis. It has required change and thinking outside the box. Schools are under significant pressure to create a safe and effective learning environment in the middle of all this worldly turmoil. One of the potential solutions being considered for reducing class sizes and socially distancing students and staff is tents for outdoor classrooms. Districts considering such an option must evaluate all the unique exposures this type of environment can present.

The following information was consolidated by the JIF Executive Director and Safety Director to help you make an informed decision about what is in the best interest of the district, teachers and students.

Regulatory Concerns

Based on the type of tent, size, use of wall panels and location you may be subject to various code requirements. This could include:

- Permits from the local or State Fire Official for a tent or membrane-supported structure.
- Tents can only be used from April 1 through November 30 unless a waiver is granted.
- Tents need to be inspected by the Fire Official having jurisdiction.
- Illuminated exit signs and emergency lighting may be required depending on the layout.
- Fire extinguishers may need to be mounted and marked by signage.
- Power to the tent may require installation of an electrical subpanel, weather-resistant fixtures and proper permitting and inspections.
- Are there plans to use the tents in colder weather? Will portable heaters be involved?
- Accessibility and inclusion requirements under ADA and NJ Barrier Free Subcode.

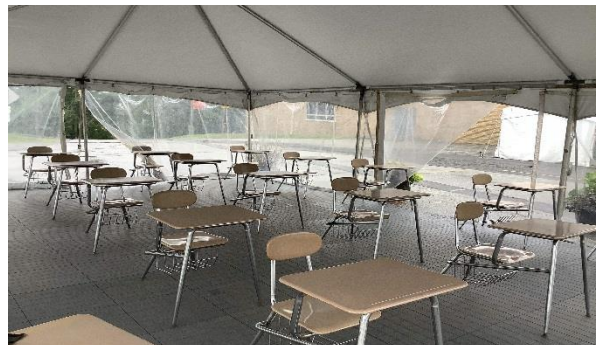
Liability Concerns

- Do you have a safe location to place the tents away from potential hazards such as parking lots?
- How does the use of tents mesh with the district security procedures including managing for potential issues such as active shooter, pedophiles, custody disputes, unknown subject on property, etc.?



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- Consideration of weather concerns such as rain, high winds, lightning, heat and humidity. Who will monitor future weather data and decide when to vacate? Will you have a safe place inside the buildings to locate the students. Will ventilation fans be provided on warmer days?
- Potential exposure to bugs and bees for staff and students that may be allergic.
- How will bathroom breaks be handled? Who will monitor children leaving the tent to use the restroom?
- Will the district purchase tents or rent them? Do the tents meet both structural requirements and flammability resistance requirements under construction and fire codes?
- Who will set up the tents and inspect them on a regular basis to ensure they are in good condition?

Additional Considerations

Districts thinking of renting tents from a commercial vendor should ensure they obtain a Certificate of Insurance. The rental company should be fully responsible for delivery, set-up, take down and periodic safety inspections. You cannot simply set a tent up and leave it for several months without inspecting the supports and anchoring systems.

The rental company should be able to provide a certification that the tents meet International Building Codes and NFPA flammability standards. Make sure the tents are of high quality. With restaurants having consumed much of the tent market for outdoor dining, districts may get stuck with inferior tents.

Remember that a tent with wall panels rather than open sides creates additional issues. The wall panels make the tent subject to more fire and safety code requirements, like illuminated exit signage. Also, the use of walls on the tent creates the same indoor health concerns regarding virus spread.

Consider how you will provide internet service to those outdoor areas and ensure that only authorized devices can access the internet and security procedures are in place to geo-fence against intrusion.

Plan on how the district will protect and manage any assets used outside such as furniture, electronics, supplies, etc. Plan on increased labor and cleaning costs for adding additional square footage to the properties.

Conclusion

As you can see, the idea of outdoor classrooms is not as simple as renting a tent and placing desks and chairs under it. There are many policies, procedures and planning considerations into making this transition successful. These are challenging times and the guidance protocols change almost daily. If you have any questions or need any assistance, please contact the JIF Executive Director or JIF Safety Director.



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