

## **TORNADO, ETC., DRILLS**

### **House Bill 5237 (Substitute H-1) First Analysis (2-10-98)**

**Sponsor: Rep. Gerald Law  
Committee: Education**

#### ***THE APPARENT PROBLEM:***

Tornadoes are a serious threat to life and property in Michigan, according to weather experts. A meteorologist from a Detroit television station told the House Education Committee that while Michigan ranks only 20th among states in the number of tornadoes experienced between 1953 and 1995, it ranks 8th nationally when one considers strong tornados as a percentage of total tornadoes and 4th in tornado-related deaths. He noted that last July, 16 tornadoes struck south central and southeastern lower Michigan, and that there had been a similar cluster of 15 tornadoes in late March of 1991. Tornadoes, moreover, while more common in southern Michigan, are said to be a statewide phenomenon, with a combination of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes occurring last year in parts of Crawford, Oscoda, and Arenac counties and two tornadoes occurring in the Upper Peninsula. The meteorologist also cited the dramatic and disastrous tornadoes that struck Kalamazoo's downtown in 1980 and Frankenmuth two years ago, and pointed out that the tornado that struck Flint in 1953, killing 115 and injuring over 814, was the 8th deadliest tornado in American history (and landed a direct hit on Beecher High School).

Weather experts stress that schools should plan for tornadoes and conduct drills, much as they now conduct fire drills, so that administrators, teachers, and students will be able to respond quickly and appropriately when tornadoes occur. According to press accounts, teachers in one western Michigan school district recently mistook a tornado warning for a fire alarm and took students outside the building (which is inappropriate action in the event of a tornado). Ultimately no tornado formed, but the circumstances are prompting school officials there to review their emergency procedures. Schools are currently required to hold a minimum of ten fire drills each year. Legislation has been introduced to require that some of those drills be "shelter in-place" drills; that is, drills to practice procedures in the event of tornadoes and other severe weather.

#### ***THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:***

The Fire Prevention Code requires schools to have at least ten fire drills for each school year. The bill would

amend the code to require that at least two of the ten required drills be "shelter in-place drills" (e.g., tornado drills).

The code says "the chief administrative officer and the teachers of all schools, including state supported schools, colleges, and universities and the owner, or owner's representative, of all school dormitories shall have a fire drill each month and keep all doors and exits unlocked during school hours, and when the school is open to the public." If weather does not permit fire drills at least once per month, then at least six fire drills must be held in the fall and four during the remainder of the school year.

MCL 29.19

### ***FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:***

The House Fiscal Agency reports that the bill could affect local costs: one type of drill might cost more to conduct than the other. The impact on costs is indeterminate. (HFA fiscal note dated 10-9-97)

### ***ARGUMENTS:***

#### ***For:***

Schools ought to hold tornado drills so that they will be prepared to respond quickly and appropriately in the event of a tornado or other severe weather. Currently, there is no statutory requirement that schools hold tornado drills even though tornadoes are a genuine threat in Michigan. Information packets are available to schools from the Michigan Committee for Severe Weather Awareness providing information on the appropriate procedures.

#### ***Against:***

Doesn't this kind of requirement go against the philosophy that is supposed to underlie the newly revised school code, that of granting "general powers" to school districts? Shouldn't school districts make their own decisions about such matters?

***Response:***

It should be noted that this bill would amend the Fire Prevention Code, not the Revised School Code. Further, the requirement that schools hold fire drills is already in the law and no attempt has been made to remove it. This bill simply addresses the same issue of emergency preparedness by requiring schools to hold a minimum of two tornado drills each year.

***POSITIONS:***

Representatives of the Michigan Committee for Severe Weather Awareness and the National Weather Service indicated their support for the bill to the House Education Committee. (2-4-98)

Analyst: C. Couch

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