

Revised Position Statement: Liability of Science Educators for Laboratory Safety

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The revision and adoption of the NSTA position statement [Liability of Science Educators for Laboratory Safety](#) is both timely and necessary. It is timely given current factors such as the steady influx of new teachers entering the profession; new technologies available to enhance laboratory work; renovations to aging school science facilities and the construction of new ones in growing areas of the country; the increased emphasis on hands-on science activities; and the commitment to college-level cooperative laboratory courses at the high school level. The position statement is also necessary because the legal system can—and will—hold science educators liable for injuries caused by working in an environment in the school science lab or field known to be unsafe.

We all know that science teachers have different needs and challenges from teachers of other subjects. One such challenge can be found in our professional licensing standards, which require teachers of science to secure and maintain a safe working environment, all while engaging students in hands-on science activities amid many potential hazards. The reality is that science educators are sometimes assigned laboratories that may be considered unsafe and told to “deal with it.” For example, in science laboratories built for a safe occupancy load of 24 students and one science teacher, safety can be compromised by administrators when things get tight.

Some school administrators rationalize that five or 10 more students won’t make a difference, but legal fire and building

occupancy codes, quasi-legal professional standards, and formal research clearly indicate that a dangerous “tipping point” exists when it comes to class size and occupancy loads for safe science laboratory operations. When this point is exceeded, the environment is unsafe for all occupants!

Unfortunately, many educators—under intense pressure to meet curriculum expectations—will carry out the planned or required laboratory activity knowing that it is dangerous or unsafe. Science teachers should be aware that neglecting the standard of conduct to protect students against unreasonable risk can lead to liability for themselves and the school district. When all is said and done, the professionally licensed science teacher—not the school or district administrator—is expected to have the knowledge and experience in laboratory work to determine if the laboratory environment is unsafe.

So what’s a teacher to do? Most importantly, we must not abandon high quality science teaching for all students. We need to continue teaching science in engaging, innovative, and exciting ways that give students opportunities to experiment using hands-on, process, and in-inquiry-type instructional strategies. With the myriad of new teaching vehicles such as computers and electronic instrumentation, it’s an exciting time to teach science. However, when an unsafe environment exists, teachers must safely alter or adjust activities or choose alternatives that will keep science safe for all students.

Teachers also need to assume a leadership role in working with school officials to improve the science lab environment. Educating and seeking support from administrators should help to ensure laboratory safety while meeting curriculum

expectations.

NSTA selected nationally and internationally recognized specialists in the areas of law, education, science, and safety to serve on its position statement review panel. Their charge was to work collectively to create a “living” position statement that actively supports science educators and supervisors in the trenches. It also provides direction and guidance for school officials in ways to help reduce safety risks while maintaining and improving hands-on science instruction. NSTA members had a chance to comment on the draft and recommend changes. The result is a comprehensive and thorough document that serves as an important guide for both current science educators and those preparing to enter the profession.

The statement’s introduction sets the stage, focusing on the issues of duty of care, teacher/school district liability, and establishing a safe learning environment.

Part one of the “Declarations” focuses on a spectrum of actions in which science teachers need to be engaged to help make their classes exciting and safe, be it in a school laboratory or out in the field. It provides clear, legally based actions and strategies to establish and implement safe working environments. Part two of this section is aimed at school administrators and supervisors and concerns their responsibilities to help science teachers meet the legal and quasi-legal standards for establishing a safe working environment. Part three charges school board members with their role in ensuring that learning occurs in a safe environment.

Establishing a safe working environment in the science laboratory must be a communal affair, with responsibility shared by science teachers, school and district administrators, board of education members, parents, and students. I encourage you to become familiar with the new position statement and the other great resources from NSTA that discuss safety, science instruction, teacher professional development, and more.

<http://www.nsta.org/about/positions/liability.aspx>

http://www.nsta.org/pdfs/PositionStatement_Liability.pdf