

## Case Study

### *Trend Toward Installing Sprinkler Systems Stems from Public School Mandate*

#### **Updated Fire Protection in Private Schools**

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Sometimes even the angels need a little help, especially when it comes to getting up to code and protecting their charges. Guardian Angels Catholic School in the Minneapolis suburb of Chaska is a lot like any educational setting, other than its heavenly school name. Its enrollment of 350 children is busy with regularly scheduled and extracurricular activities, all aimed at moving them to higher education and good jobs.

Municipalities, such as Chaska, have adopted Appendix I-A of the 1997 Uniform Fire Code requiring private schools to address the same life safety issues, such as open staircases and corridor separation, which the public schools do. The local Fire Marshal and Assistant Fire Chief, Kevin Gravalin, whose daughter had attended the school, inspected the building and found that the addition of sprinklers and a fire alarm system would be the most cost-effective solution to meet the fire code requirements.

Knowing what Gravalin and Futrell Fire know about many private schools – that they are not up to code and subsequently are unsafe because of the way they were built – the Chaska fire marshal was instrumental in convincing the school to protect its kids and staff. Faced with the same risks and liabilities as their public school counterparts, Guardian Angels School did the right thing and moved to protect its students and faculty against fire in 2002. Working with Futrell Fire, the school set out to create a deterrent. Futrell Fire helped with:

- Designing a sprinkler system
- Designing a fire alarm system
- Drafting of bid documents for contractors
- Construction Administration (review of all installations)

“Fifty years ago, 92 children and 3 nuns died in a Chicago school building similar to the one at Guardian Angels, where the open stairwells and corridors lined with doors with glass transoms acted as ready conduits to feed a fire,” Gravalin says. “By enclosing the stairwells and installing the proper fire protection systems, Guardian Angels School is now a much safer building that meets code.”

“Many of these schools were built and/or remodeled before the fire code was in place,” notes Scott Futrell, President of Futrell Fire. “Many don’t even have a good fire alarm system; often they don’t have fire doors or rated walls. Common sense would tell you that the potential for loss of life and property under these situations would be extremely high. What we’re seeing today is more and more private schools taking it upon themselves to provide fire protection systems that work and that they can afford. They can’t afford not to.”

Father Larry Johnson, of Guardian Angels School, takes a slightly loftier view of Futrell Fire’s work. Noting that the building will be a much safer place now, he adds, “I think of you (Project Manager Phil Awker) and Futrell Fire as part of the Guardian Angels Family rather than as someone I hired.”