



POLICY RECOMMENDATION 2026-1

IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION, DESIGN, AND CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOLS

Alaskans should expect that their children attend schools that are resistant to damaging earthquake hazards such as strong shaking, ground failure, and tsunami inundation. Further, many school facilities in Alaska are also used as community gathering places and as emergency shelters in times of natural disaster. Therefore, the Alaska Seismic Hazards Safety Commission (ASHSC) recommends that:

- **The State should require school districts to appropriate the resources necessary to identify their school facilities that are most at risk from earthquakes.**
- **The State appropriate resources for programs that prioritize rehabilitation or replacement of those school facilities most at risk from earthquakes.**
- **The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Department of Public Safety (Division of Fire Safety), and Department of Transportation and Public Facilities should adopt each International Building Code (IBC) as soon as practicable** after publication for designing new schools and additions. They should also adopt the International Existing Building Code for structural retrofits of schools. The seismic provisions in each IBC reflect significant technical changes from previous codes—all very relevant for Alaska—which would improve the resilience and safety of future schools and public buildings.
- **An independent peer review of seismic design calculations and detailing for school buildings is completed by a qualified structural engineer.**
- **During construction, on-site observations of as-constructed earthquake engineering details are conducted by a qualified inspector** to ensure they are constructed in accordance with the contract documents.

DISCUSSION

Alaska has an extensive inventory of school buildings, some of which were built up to three-quarters of a century ago. Many were designed using codes that allowed design and construction practices that subsequent earthquakes revealed as problematic. Some school districts do periodic seismic evaluations and others only do them as part of their request for State funding.

In 2015, the ASHSC, using Federal funding, worked with the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute to arrange for the evaluation of 47 schools in five of the larger school districts using the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) P-154 Rapid Visual Screening of Buildings for Potential Seismic Hazards, 2nd Edition. This is a relatively inexpensive (<\$1000/building) evaluation process. A description of the FEMA evaluation process and the results of the study can be found at:

[https://www.seismic.alaska.gov/download/ashsc_meetings_minutes/Stevens_Hazard Commission_Handout_FINAL.pdf](https://www.seismic.alaska.gov/download/ashsc_meetings_minutes/Stevens_Hazard_Commission_Handout_FINAL.pdf)

The results varied from <0.1% to 50% chance of damage in a future major earthquake and can be used to prioritize where seismic school retrofits are most needed.

The Anchorage School District completes seismic evaluations using the more rigorous American Society of Civil Engineers standard ASCE 41 Seismic Evaluation of and Retrofit of Buildings to determine required seismic deficiencies before any remodel, reroof, or addition. They also use it for design of seismic upgrades. After the 2018 earthquake, they had these analyses completed for every school in the district.

The other 50 or so school districts use a variety of methods to evaluate school buildings. Unfortunately, ASHSC knows of no systemic requirement to evaluate existing school buildings on a statewide basis, nor any funding for such an endeavor. Many of the seismic evaluations use less rigorous methods than FEMA P-154 or ASCE 41 and are done as part of an attempt to get higher up the Department of Education funding priority list. Unfortunately, that priority list has seen little funding in recent years.

As to building codes, it takes the State Fire Marshal several years to adopt the latest editions of the International Family of Codes: Building Code, Fire Code, Mechanical Code, Fuel Gas Code, and Existing Building Code. As of this writing, in mid-2026, the codes published in 2024 have not even been put out for public comment. A new edition will be published in 2027. The Department of Labor is no faster. The current state electrical code is the 2020 National Electrical Code, despite the latest published edition is from 2023 and a new one will be published in 2026. In addition, the latest plumbing code is the 2018 Uniform Plumbing Code, even though there have been new editions every three years since then (2021 and 2024). There are critical seismic bracing requirements in both codes that should be kept up to date.

Outside a few deferred jurisdictions, schools (and other significant structures) do not get an independent review of the structural design by a structural engineer or IBC certified structural plan reviewer. This independent set of eyes is critical in catching errors of omission or misunderstanding of the code. The Fire Marshal and several deferred jurisdictions only look at fire and life safety issues. They may check that the basic design loads listed in the General Notes seem reasonable, but do not go beyond that. This is a critical missing piece of the process of verifying the integrity of a design and should be added.

Once a building gets a permit, there is a highly variable amount of inspection to ensure that the contractor builds it according to plan. A few jurisdictions have rigorous municipal inspections, but most do not. Requiring Special Inspections and Structural Observations by the designer should be required.



POLICY RECOMMENDATION 2026-01 IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION, DESIGN, AND CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOLS

HISTORY

PR 2026-01 was approved unanimously on October 15, 2026 and supersedes PRs 2010-1, 2010-2, 2013-2, 2015-1, and 2015-2.