

RISK SIMPLIFIED

QUESTIONS

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Mitigating Employee Use of Personal Appliances

by Eric Lucero

Appliances include microwaves, refrigerators, toasters, coffee makers, space heaters, and more. They have become so common in every household that it is easy to overlook the hazards they pose to students, staff and district property. This edition of Risk Simplified addresses employees using personal appliances at their school site. The following considerations should be reviewed and incorporated into an appliance-use policy.

Sanitation.

California Code of Regulations, Title 8, section 3368, prohibits eating and drinking in areas that may be contaminated by toxic contaminants. Consequently, appliances such as microwaves, refrigerators, toasters and coffee makers are prohibited from being used in industrial classrooms and science laboratories.

Burn Injuries. If an appliance could injure an employee or student, it should not be allowed inside the classroom. Appliances should only be used by employees while under their direct supervision. Thermal burns can also occur when handling hot containers or if items are not allowed to cool before consumption.



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Fire Hazards. The risk of fire is of paramount concern. A fire can occur when combustible materials are within a close proximity to appliances. Heat generating appliances must not be used within three feet of desks, trash cans, or other combustible materials. Additional best practices are listed below:

- Only use appliances that are approved by an independent testing laboratory such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL), CSA Group, or Intertek Group (ETL).
- Only use appliances per the manufacturer's instructions.
- Unplug appliances when not in use or at the end of the work day.
- Inspect appliances daily to identify hazards such as damaged cords, exposed wiring, or anything that could jeopardize the normal function of the appliance.
- If within six feet of a water source, the outlet in use must be equipped with a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI). GFCIs monitor the amount of current flowing inside an electrical circuit. GFCIs are similar to circuit breakers used in electrical panels. If a GFCI detects an electrical short, it will break the circuit to prevent the user from becoming injured.
- Know the location of the nearest fire extinguisher.
- Do not overload the electrical circuit. If a circuit breaker repeatedly interrupts power to the appliance or the cord warms while in use, a licensed electrician should evaluate the circuit.
- Avoid microwaving popcorn as it can easily cause microwave fires and set off smoke detector alarms.
- Always plug appliances directly into the outlet and never use extension cords or power strips.
- Only use appliances that include a grounding plug unless the electrical cord is double insulated.
- Cords cannot be affixed to structures, extended through walls, ceiling, floors, under doors, or subject to environmental damage or physical impact.
- Barbecue grills should not be used within ten feet of any building and not within twenty feet of flammable liquids.

School districts should determine their tolerance for personal use of appliances by employees on campus grounds. If personal appliances are allowed to be used, an appliance-use policy should be developed. Key components of the policy include:

1. The approval process for using personal appliances.
2. Where appliances are to be used and areas that appliances are prohibited.
3. A requirement that employees read, acknowledge, and comply with safe work practices stated in the policy.
4. The consequences for not adhering to the policy.

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