

# Rural schools at greatest fire safety risk: Jones

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*Yvonne Jones questions whether rural schools have sufficient fire safety protection. (CBC)*

Some schools in rural Newfoundland and Labrador communities are not getting proper fire safety inspections, the leader of the Opposition says.

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones, who has been raising the issue of fire safety for the last two weeks, pressed the government again on it Monday in the legislature.

Jones said school inspections are not being done in areas without active volunteer fire departments, and told government about information on particular schools that was provided to the Opposition.

"We do not know if the information we have been given is factual or if it is not, but we will be passing on a list of schools to the fire commissioner's office to have [it] checked," Jones told the legislature.

The list includes schools with possible safety violations, and schools that apparently are not being inspected at all. The latter schools are in rural areas, where the school relies on teachers and maintenance staff because a volunteer fire department is not available.

"In cases like this, we are coming to understand that the only kind of inspection at all being done is a checklist being performed at the school by individuals that have not been properly trained in what the fire and safety codes are," Jones said.

The Liberals have been raising questions about school safety since the fire commissioner's office released in April details of numerous fire-safety problems with 10 hospitals and other health institutions. Among the problems cited was a dependence on volunteer fire departments and a lack of training in some areas.

Fire Commissioner Fred Hollett has since expanded his study to look at other hospitals, clinics and nursing homes.

Education Minister Joan Burke, though, said Monday that the system in the schools is working, and that checklist inspections are enough to spot urgent problems.

"I would think that the people who do the daily inspections are people who understand what they are looking for, who know how to complete the checklist," Burke said.

"It's co-signed by the principal who is available to ask questions if the particular person who is responsible for that did not understand what they were asked to do."

Burke said those inspections are just part of a larger fire safety protocol. The checklist reports are submitted to the regional school board's operations manager, who is required to deal with any safety concerns.