

# Tempers flare

*Liberal leader, minister of education have heated debate on school fire safety*

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THE TELEGRAM

**L**iberal Leader Yvonne Jones turned up the heat on the province's education minister over fire inspections at schools during question period at the House of Assembly Monday. Jones and



Yvonne Jones

Minister Joan Burke locked horns over a list of fire- and safety-related issues.

"In last week's Compass newspaper, the fire chief of Bay Roberts noted his frustration in conducting fire inspections," said Jones. She said the chief noted in the article over-crowding during concerts, improper storage of flammable material, and a lawn-mower and gas stored in a closet.

"If a fire chief from any particular area has been dealing with a school that has not been co-operative with following orders I would certainly like to see those reports forwarded," Burke answered.

Jones said it was her understanding no process or protocol is in place to follow up inspections to make sure problems have been fixed.

Burke said she would ensure the school boards follow up any reports from the fire departments and she would follow up with the boards.

That's when the temperature of the debate went up a few hundred degrees.

"On a go-forward basis, the minister herself is now going to take it upon herself that work is done and compliance is met?" asked Jones.

"If the leader of the Opposition does not want me to follow up or to take action when she's asking me a question in this House, she need not bother ask," retorted Burke.

Jones was not impressed.

"We're talking about serious life safety issues in our schools and I don't appreciate the minister's attitude here," Jones shot back.

"What I'm asking the minister, Mr. Speaker, is what is the process (after) a fire chief in a community goes into a school and conducts an inspection and writes up an inspection report?"

Burke said she would tell the school boards to follow fire inspection reports.

"I will ensure and make sure that the school boards do take those orders seriously and follow up," said Burke.

Jones then asked who would be liable if a fire or similar safety hazard occurred in a school where an inspection was done but no followup occurred.

Burke said it would fall to the school board because it is responsible for the maintenance of the school.

Jones then told the House of Assembly that fire alarm maintenance companies can usually fix problems on the spot, but when they find problems with a school's alarm they often have to wait five to six months to get board approval for the repairs.

Jones wanted that practice to stop, suggesting, "In the future, when fire alarm companies are going in to inspect alarms in schools, (and) they find malfunctions, that they will have the authority to correct it right there, right on the spot."

Burke said she would tell the officials at the boards to repair alarms right away.

Jones wrapped up the fire safety debate by comparing the state of schools to a recent report about the state of health-care facilities around the province.

"We heard the same response when we talked about hospitals in this province and after the hospitals were inspected we found a very different situation — actually, a whole list of facilities that need work," said Jones.

She said she would forward a list of schools, which the Liberals have received unconfirmed reports about safety issues, to the Fire Commissioner's Office.