

BEW

Bleacher



Bleachers such as these are hazardous to children.

When you think of bleachers, you usually think about Little League games, skating rinks, and other fun times. For some, though, those fun times have come to a tragic halt.

In January 1999, for example, a 6-year-old boy was watching his big brother warm up on the ice for a hockey game. As he walked toward his mom to get money for the concession stand, he slipped and fell through a large gap (about 15 inches) between the seat and the floorboard. He landed headfirst on a concrete floor after dropping 8 feet and suffered a head injury that eventually killed him.

In separate incidents a few weeks later, a 2-year-old girl suffered a concussion and broken arm, and a 5-year-old boy fractured his skull when they fell from bleachers. These injuries were followed by another death six months after the 6-year-old boy had died. This time, the victim was a 3-year-old girl.

Are these cases a rare circumstance? Not, if you look at the statistics reported by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).

According to the CPSC, 10 people died between 1980 and 1999 from bleacher falls. Of those deaths, four were children under the age of 15. From 1991 through 1999, the annual number of bleacher-related injuries treated in emergency rooms across the country averaged more than 19,000. In 1999 alone, 22,100 injuries were treated in emergency rooms, and about 6,100 of them were the result of a person falling from or through the bleachers. Nearly 5,000 of those cases involved children 15 years old or younger.

State lawmakers in Minnesota reacted to the rash of bleacher problems in their state [*three of the four mishaps cited earlier occurred in Minnesota*] by passing a law requiring that gaps between seats and floorboards in new bleachers—5 feet or higher—be no more than 4 inches. As an alternative, safety netting can be used in gaps larger than 4

ARE Dangers

These bleachers are much safer for children.

inches. The law also states that bleachers must have vertical guardrails along their perimeter, with no more than 4 inches between the seats and guardrails. Old bleachers must be retrofitted to meet the same standard.

School districts, cities, counties, and park districts, however, complain that the law causes considerable expense. As noted by one Minnesota representative, local public schools face \$50,000 in bleacher repairs. In response, he has suggested ways to make the state restrictions less costly. His proposals are to exempt some bleachers, extend the deadline for compliance, and exempt colleges and universities altogether.

A St. Paul attorney is appalled the Minnesota Legislature is considering any measures that would weaken the law. This is the same attorney who was in the bleachers, watching his own son play hockey, when the 6-year-old boy fell to his death. Afterward, he helped persuade the Minnesota Legislature to pass the nation's first bleacher-safety law.

Lawmakers have been unable to agree on a timetable for compliance with the new law. The Minnesota House voted to extend the deadline from Jan. 1, 2001 to July 1, 2001, and the Senate has voted to extend it even farther—to July 1, 2002. The matter of enforcement also is up in the air. As



written, the law will force facility operators to police themselves.

The CPSC is in the process of developing national guidelines for retrofitting bleachers that will be stricter than those outlined in Minnesota's law. Manufacturers, members of Congress, and parents of children injured or killed in bleacher falls gathered for a roundtable discussion with CPSC officials last year. Among those parents present was the father of a 10-year-old girl who sustained life-threatening injuries three years ago. She fell through a 13-inch gap in the floorboards of the bleachers at a high school in Prince William County, Va.

The 10-year-old sat beside her father during the CPSC discussion, holding a 12-inch ruler, which, as she explained, spelled the difference between her life and death. She landed 12 inches from a concrete pillar.

Guidelines for bleacher safety should (and probably will) become mandated nationwide. ■