

PREBLE HIGH FIRE DAMAGE:

\$7.5M

Spontaneous combustion in gym caused second-largest blaze in Green Bay's history

By Nathan Phelps
Press-Gazette Media

A large fire at the Green Bay Preble High School gym over the summer was among the largest in city history and caused \$7.5 million in damage, officials said Wednesday.

The 36-page report by the Green Bay Metro Fire Department on the Aug. 8 incident includes the estimated loss of property and contents at the school. About \$100,000 in contents were destroyed in the fire, according to the report.

It was the second-largest fire in Green Bay's history. Only the Leicht Transfer and Storage warehouse fire, which caused \$10 million damage on April 21, 1999, was more costly, according to reports from the time of that incident.

The early-morning fire was caused by spontaneous combustion of chemical-laden rags that had been improperly disposed by district workers, causing smoke damage throughout the building. The workers had been refinishing the floor in the fieldhouse, the larger of the school's two gymnasiums.

The fire department report lists the fire — which was captured on surveillance video — as “unintentional.”

Lt. Nick Craig of the Green Bay Metro Fire Department said investigators got a

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handle on the probable cause of the fire early on in the investigation.

“We had video surveillance of the gymnasium where the fire started, so we actually got to see the

fire start,” he said. “Through some interviews shortly after the fire ... it didn't take real long to put the pieces together.”

The rags were placed in plastic garbage cans next to the bleachers on Aug. 4. Lids were left off the garbage cans, according to the report.

The first indication of fire, shown on video, occurs around 1:12 a.m. on Aug. 8.

No one was injured in the fire, but the start of classes at Preble were postponed for two weeks, to Sept. 15.

The Green Bay Area Public School District reviewed the incident, and, in an emailed statement on Wednesday, said its procedures “for disposing of rags did not follow the procedures specified by the manufacturer of the finishing product.”

The district said it made changes in staff responsible for oversight of safety procedures and has hired a facilities maintenance manager to review all of the district's safety procedures.

The school district didn't have a damage estimate outside the one provided by the fire department. It has a \$25,000

deductible on its insurance policy, said Lori Blakeslee, the district's director of communication.

The district offered no additional comment outside of its emailed statement, which did not say whether anyone was fired or disciplined in connection with the fire.

Nick said the \$7.5 million figure could change depending on the work required in the field house.

Cleanup crews worked for six weeks to get the school ready for students.

Floors, walls, carpets, computers, lockers and other items were cleaned and checked for smoke damage, and the building has been cleared by health and building officials and by a hygienist monitoring air quality. The fieldhouse, where the fire started, is not scheduled to reopen until Nov. 22, officials said.

School days were extended by nearly 20 minutes to make up for lost time. Other Green Bay district schools started on Sept. 2.

The fire department report found that the



school district had issues with the floor finish product in the past.

Floor crew members told investigators they found an elevated temperature and a smoldering garbage can containing used rags at Chappell Elementary School.

In another incident, at Keller Elementary School, a crew member told investigators the lid on a large trash collection bin had burned after floor finish was put in it.

Nick said spontaneous combustion fires aren't unheard of.

"It's something we see from time to time," he said. "We've seen it at last one other time this year. It resulted in a garbage can melting at the curb.

"A guy disposed of some rags in a plastic bin to be picked up, and woke up the next morning and the whole can was a big puddle of goo."

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GREEN BAY AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT STATEMENT

The Green Bay Fire Department has released its report on the Preble fire, which occurred on August 8, 2014.

The report finds that the origin of the fire was rags disposed in a garbage can that had been used in refinishing the gym floor. The cause of the fire was determined to be accidental in nature.

The Green Bay Area Public School District has also completed its review of the incident. It was determined that the District's previous procedures for disposing of rags did not follow the procedures specified by the manufacturer of the finishing product.

Personnel changes have occurred regarding the staff responsible for oversight of safety procedures. The District has hired a manager of facilities maintenance, safety and security, who will be conducting a full review of all of the District's safety procedures.

"Student and staff safety is our utmost priority," stated Mike Stangel, executive director of facilities. "The District is extremely grateful that no one was hurt in the fire. Thanks to [Paul Davis](#) National, Preble administration, the community and our students and staff, Preble High School has started its 2014-15 school year, and we anxiously await the opening of the field house in November."



EVAN SIEGLE/PRESS-GAZETTE MEDIA

Fire damage inside the main gymnasium at Green Bay Preble High School on Aug. 14. Fire crews were called to the school early Friday to extinguish a fire in the bleachers in the gymnasium. Smoke damage was present throughout the building.