Best Practices for Safety in Portable Instructional Buildings

As required by the 86th Texas Legislature and SB 11, the following resource outlines safety and security best practices developed to assist schools in ensuring student safety and the safety of all persons in portable buildings used for instruction. In the context of this resource, “best practices” are considered to be those actions or techniques that have been tested through experience and/or research and have been demonstrated to be efficient and effective ways of accomplishing the task or goal. Specific school or district needs, resources, and other factors may influence decisions as to whether these practices are the best or most appropriate for the intended purpose or goal.

These best practices are organized by function:

- Access Control
- Communication
- Structural Protection
- Access and Functional Needs
- Surveillance and Monitoring
- Drills and Response
- Safety Procedures

ACCESS CONTOL:

Access control is generally considered to be the selective restriction of access to a place or other resource. This may include measures to limit the number of ingress or entry doors, implementation of access control policies and procedures, or all of these items. Access control remains one of the main challenges of school facilities whether they are portable or permanent structures.

1. **Exterior Door Locks:** Building/facility doors must include an appropriate locking system to restrict access. This may include key locks, magnetic, or electronic locks. Portable classrooms or temporary structures should have locking systems to secure all doors to the building/classroom and include features that allow occupants to secure themselves from the inside. Locks and locking systems must remain compliant with local building codes as well as ADA requirements.

2. **Fencing:** The purpose of appropriate fencing is to restrict access to buildings and areas except through approved, secured entry and exit points using approved protocols. This is especially important to restrict direct access to portables from the parking areas, roadways or other school property.

Fencing types, height, location and other specifics would be dictated by the functional characteristics based on the facility needs and protocols.
3. **Gates:** Used in conjunction with fencing, gates can allow secured entry, whether monitored by personnel or electronic means, to provide functional access as determined by the facility security plan and protocol.

Gate types, locations, features and other specifics would be dictated by the functional characteristics based on the facility needs and protocols.

4. **Signage:** Signage reinforcing access and security protocol should be clearly visible. Access to portables should only be allowed through the main or monitored secured entries to schools/facilities.

5. **Keeping Classroom Doors Locked:** It continues to a best practice to keep classroom doors locked during instruction and at all other times to the extent possible. Keeping classroom doors locked in portable structures is even more important, as there are no additional layers of protection between the outdoor access and the classroom.

**COMMUNICATION:**

Portable classrooms and temporary structures provide additional challenges for access to audible communication. This section addresses some communication best practices and requirements associated with portables.

1. **Telephones and communication devices:** Every classroom must provide access for employees, including substitute teachers, to a telephone, cell phone, or other electronic communication device to allow immediate contact with emergency services or responders. In addition to being a best practice, SB 11 modified TEC 37.108 requiring access to telephones and communication devices in portables. Periodic testing of signal strength should be conducted to ensure communication performance in and around portable buildings.

2. **Audible Communications:** Warnings and announcements should be audible in outdoor areas, including the areas surrounding portables. This allows for communication to those moving from building to building and involved with activities in close proximity to all buildings.

**STRUCTURAL PROTECTION:**

Portable classrooms do not provide the same level of protection from natural, technological or man-made hazards as permanent structures. This section addresses best practices for mitigating some of those challenges.

1. **Compliance with Local Building Codes:** Portables must comply with all appropriate jurisdictional building and fire codes.

2. **Skirting and Underpinning:** Portables should be underpinned appropriately as dictated by applicable building codes. In addition, space between the ground and the floor of the portable should be skirted using appropriate materials to prevent access under the
portable by unauthorized persons or animals. Utility connections such as water and gas lines should be protected and not left exposed to tampering or damage. Utilities should be protected from vehicles during the placement, installation, use, maintenance and/or removal of portable buildings.

3. **Doors and Surrounding Structural Integrity:** Wherever possible doors should be made of steel with steel frames. Hollow core doors should NOT be used as exterior doors. Also, the exterior walls surrounding doors should be reinforced to prevent breaching.

**ACCESS AND FUNCTIONAL NEEDS:**

Portable classrooms may provide additional challenges for those individuals with access and functional needs. Because of the elevation of most portables, modifications may need to be provided to make the buildings ADA compliant and accessible.

1. **Accessibility:** Ramps to provide appropriate access to portables should meet all applicable accessibility requirements. Consideration for placement and use of portables should be made with future accessibility needs in mind. Emergency egress and proximity to permanent structures should be considered so that equal access to safety is afforded to everyone in an emergency.

2. **Emergency and Secondary Exits:** Secondary exits in portable buildings, if present, should provide for accessible egress from the building for use in an emergency. Doors that are NOT available as an exit in an emergency should be clearly labeled as NOT AN EXIT.

**SURVEILLANCE AND MONITORING:**

Portable classrooms are more vulnerable to direct access than permanent structures. Surveillance and monitoring are essential to prevent unauthorized access to portables and the areas surrounding them.

1. **Cameras:** The use of video cameras and monitoring should be implemented in areas around portables to provide for monitoring of activities and adherence to access control and visitor management protocols. Where possible, live monitoring can assist with identifying needs for additional actions and deploying security personnel to prevent unauthorized access.

2. **Monitoring:** Monitoring can be accomplished by personnel on site or remotely through video monitoring. Personnel should be utilized in areas where sufficient video surveillance is not available or during times of heavy activity volume, such as drop-off and pick-up times, passing periods or activities. Video monitoring may be an effective solution in areas with less frequent activity, where it is not feasible to deploy human resources, or when cameras have live monitoring.

3. **Door Viewers:** It is important that portable classrooms have door viewers or cameras available that allow occupants to observe anyone seeking to enter the
classroom/building before they open the door. This allows staff to identify that the person at the door is authorized for entry into the classroom.

4. **Lighting**: Lighting should be installed around portable structures to deter criminal activity and assist with safety and security concerns while moving between the main facility and portable classrooms, especially in early morning and evening hours. Maintenance or relocation of existing lighting often can provide improved visibility around portables.

**DRILLS AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE:**

School/district emergency operations plans must include drills and response actions. Portable structures may require additional considerations or modifications. The following best practices address challenges for emergency response and conducting drills in portable structures.

1. **Building and Classroom Labeling/Numbering**: Clearly identifying portable structures by labeling or numbering each building and classroom has proven to assist in responding to incidents and emergencies. Identification should be placed on the building and on or next to the doors so that they may be visible approaching the facility.

   Consideration should be given to following room-numbering patterns used in the permanent structures. Identifiers might include P for portable or some other description to assist in identifying locations. Multiple buildings may be sequentially numbered. The goal is to provide a clear and understandable way to quickly locate the buildings and/or classrooms. Each portable MUST be identified on current school site plans and should have clear building/classroom evacuation routes.

2. **Drills**: Drills must include all classrooms and areas of the school/facility. Drills and response actions rely on previously mentioned communication systems within each portable and area of campus. Drills require specific actions based on the hazard or threat. Portable structures may have DIFFERENT criteria for evacuation and DIFFERENT protocol based on the protective limits of the structures.

3. **Response Plans**: Emergency operation plans should contain responses to emergencies for each and all areas of a school. Because portable buildings do not offer sufficient protection from high winds associated with severe weather, provisions should be in place to move students into a safer area within a permanent structure when severe weather is reasonably expected or an appropriate alert is received.

   For example: in the event of a severe storm watch, it might be best to move students into a permanent structure. Waiting until a watch becomes a warning may subject students to moving during severe weather conditions. Procedures should be developed with these considerations in mind. Areas within a permanent school structure should be designated to accommodate those students during severe weather conditions.
SAFETY PROCEDURES:

The following best practices address a variety of additional safety and security challenges in portable classrooms and buildings.

1. **Visitor Management:** Visitor management procedures should include the needs and concerns of those in portable classrooms and buildings. Visitors to any classrooms or building on a campus should go through an authorization process established by the school that usually occurs in the front office. Procedures should be developed and implemented that address authorized visitors getting to and from the portables safely and only as needed. This may require an adult escort or meeting the visitor in another portion of the school other than the portable. These are procedures that the district/campus should develop based on their needs. No unauthorized persons should access a portable directly. All visitors to any campus buildings should be required to sign-in and sign-out through the building’s main office.

2. **Student Procedures:** Procedures should be developed and implemented for student safety when going between their portable classroom and other areas of campus. Students often travel to the main school building. Procedures should take into account adult supervision resources and communication. Plans and procedures should include how district or school personnel will accomplish supervision and their tolerance for having young students walking alone outside of the main buildings to get to their classroom, if located in a portable.

3. **Emergency Access by Responders:** Even if portables are clearly numbered, responders may have additional access challenges for getting equipment into the area. Fences should have emergency access gates or be constructed of materials that can be breached by responders in a large-scale emergency. Prior to adding portables to a campus, safety and security committees should ensure that responders are represented on planning teams to determine the number, location, and construction of portable classrooms.

These best practices address the over-arching functional areas for improving safety in portable instructional buildings. The identification of additional best practices as well as how these practices are implemented within a specific school or district should be determined through collaboration between school administration, staff, law enforcement and local stakeholders.