

COALITION FOR HEALTHIER SCHOOLS

Position Statement: 2005

Issue: Improving education, child health, the environment, and communities.



Each day over 53 million school children and 6 million adults - 20 % of the entire U.S. population - enter our nation's 120,000 school buildings to teach and learn. Unfortunately, in too many cases, they enter "unhealthy" school buildings," that undermine learning and health.

Many school facilities have been poorly maintained and thousands of our nation's schools remain severely overcrowded. Schools are often sited next to industrial plants or on abandoned landfills; new schools are built beyond safe walking or biking distance for students. In a recent five-state survey, more than 1,100 public schools were built within a half-mile of a toxic waste site. Polluted indoor air, toxic chemical and pesticide use, growing molds, lead in paint and drinking water, and asbestos are also factors that impact the health of our nation's students and school staff. These problems contribute to absenteeism, student medication use, learning difficulties, sick building syndrome, staff turnover, and greater liability for school districts.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Studies show that one-half of our nation's schools have problems linked to indoor air quality. Students, teachers and staff are at greater risk because of the hours spent in school facilities and because children are especially susceptible to pollutants." Schools are also more densely occupied and more intensively used than offices, which contribute to the overall problem.

This comes at time when 6.3 million school age children are afflicted with asthma. As a result, asthma is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 14 million school days are lost annually as a result of asthma. The increase in asthma is particularly acute in urban areas with large numbers of African-American, Hispanic American and other minority students.

At a time when this nation is committed to raising academic performance and making sure each child has an opportunity to learn to his or her potential, we believe we have a moral obligation to protect and promote the health of our nation's school children. Clear and convincing research shows that improving school indoor environmental quality, siting, and design, using non-toxic products for cleaning, maintenance and instruction, providing more natural daylight, and creating energy efficient, neighborhood schools with adequate, safe space for outdoor activities, will all contribute to protecting the health of our children, to improving public education, and to creating healthier communities.

There is a powerful and growing array of groups for protecting the health and learning of our nation's school children: millions of parents, thousands of organizations, community groups, public health and professional organizations, school employees, labor unions, and environmental groups support environmentally safe and healthy schools, including the parents and teachers of the seven million children in special education programs (IDEA), are core constituencies that care deeply about these issues.

We support and ask that elected and appointed officials:

Federal Officials

- Urge key federal agencies to create and implement a plan to prevent school environmental hazards, and a plan to prevent harm to children and other school occupants. Coordinated plans can build upon work underway at CDC, EPA, and Education (“*A Summary of Scientific Findings on Adverse Effects of Indoor Environments on Students’ Health...*”, 2004, *USD Education # 2004-06*; and, “*Science-based Recommendations for Preventing Potential Exposures to Biological, Chemical and Physical Agents in Schools*”, *J of School Health*, Dec 2004).

- Fund the Healthy High Performance School Act in No Child Left Behind at 25 million dollars a year. The appropriation will allow Department of Education to activate a grant program to help states show schools how to design and engineer healthier and more energy efficient facilities, improve indoor environmental quality, protect and conserve water, take advantage of new energy efficient technologies, and save money (*NCLB of 2001, Sec. 5581-86 ff defines and establishes Healthy, High Performance Schools state grant program*).

- Increase funding and staff for EPA’s Office of Child Health Protection so it can coordinate EPA’s outreach to schools; sustain resources for other EPA programs such as *LAQ Tools for Schools* and *Design Tools for Schools*. These technical assistance programs are part of the EPA’s commitment to improve schools with resources to help state agencies, as well as local school facility managers, administrators, architects, engineers, parents, teachers, school nurses, staff, and occupational and environmental health specialists assess and address environmental problems.



- Support federal funds for the states for health and safety repairs and renovations to local schools. Federal assistance will help state and local school districts remediate and renovate school buildings.

- Continue funding for the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities sponsored by the United States Department of Education. This outlet summarizes and provides online resource on planning, design, financing, construction, operations and maintenance for safe, healthy and high-performance educational facilities (www.edfacilities.org/healthy_school_environment).

- Pass the School Environmental Protection Act. This act would require local educational agencies schools to implement integrated pest management systems to minimize the use of pesticides in schools and to provide parents, guardians and employees with notice of the use of pesticides in schools (*HR 121 by R. Holt and G. Miller, to amend the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act in S.448 by C. Dodd, NCLB of 2003; to be re-introduced in 2005*).



State Officials

Promote, adopt, fund, and implement state guidelines for healthy, high performance school facility design. These include proper facility oversight and siting, adequate, safe space for outdoor activities, environmentally preferred materials for construction, pollutant source controls, adequate ventilation, durable, easy to clean surfaces and floors, moisture and mold controls, temperature and humidity controls, acoustics and noise control, ergonomics, safety and security, daylighting, and energy conservation.

Promote, adopt and fund state standards and programs to promote the use of non-toxic, environmentally preferable products and materials for school construction, instruction, and maintenance and cleaning.

Promote and fund state programs to reduce or eliminate toxic chemical products used or stored in schools such as mercury, pesticides, and solvents.

Local Government and School Board Officials

Adopt and support the use of best environmental practices, including training for school officials and staff for pest control, housekeeping, maintenance, and selection of least-toxic materials to promote and maintain a healthier school environment.

Adopt US EPA's *IAQ Tools for Schools* and *Design Tools for Schools* as model programs for improving indoor air quality and for the design and construction of healthy, productive learning environments.

Adopt an integrated pest management program to reduce the use or eliminate toxic pesticides used around students and staff, and to prevent pests from becoming problems.

Provide parents and employees with a Right-to-Know about chemicals and environmental hazards at school.

Ensure that all local school facilities prevent hazards to occupant health and are fully accessible to all students and staff with asthma, environmental, learning, developmental, and physical disabilities, and do not further compromise their abilities to stay healthy, to learn, and to work.

Footnotes:

Enrollment and employees: 53 million total public and private; public only enrollment projected at 48.2 million for 2004, 6m public school employees. National Center for Education Statistics, "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education: School Year 2001-02", 2003.

Walkable communities: US EPA, Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting, EPA 231-R-03-004, 2003.

Contaminated sites: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, with US EPA and Morehouse School of Medicine Regional Research Center for Minority Health, Oral Presentation at APHA, October 2001; also, "Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible Actions", Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, March 2001.

Asthma: US EPA, *America's Children and the Environment*, Second Edition, 2003, p 69, citing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/asthma/asthma.htm

Schools and air quality: US EPA "IAQ Tools for Schools"; number of public schools, 94,112 in 2001-02, National Center for Education Statistics, "Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools and Districts: School Year 2001-02", 2003.

Students in special education: 23rd and 24th US Department of Education/Office of Special Education Programs

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And more than 240 more supporting organizations and individuals as of December 2004

(add your group; list in formation in 2005)

The national *Coalition for Healthier Schools* provides a forum for parent, health, labor, environment, building sciences, and education organizations concerned about school environments. The Coalition is coordinated by Healthy Schools Network, Inc. For more information, visit www.healthyschools.org, or call 212-482-0204,.

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