

# Coalition for Healthier Schools

## Position Statement and Policy Recommendations

...providing the platform and the forum for school environmental health...since 2001...

Education is left to the states and every state requires children to attend school. Each day, 55 million children and 7 million adults—that's 20% of the total U.S. population and 98% of all children—spend their workdays inside P-12 schools. Unfortunately, too many of our nation's 130,000 public and private schools are "unhealthy" buildings that can harm their health and hinder learning. Today, there is sufficient evidence to show that improving specific school indoor environmental quality factors quickly can improve children's health, attendance, academic performance, and staff productivity.

### About children

Children are more vulnerable than adults to environmental hazards because they're smaller, have developing organs, and breathe more air per pound of body weight. They cannot identify hazards. Adverse exposures and injuries during childhood may have a lifetime impact. See [www.epa.gov/children](http://www.epa.gov/children)

### School factors affecting health

Many school environmental factors can affect the health of children and employees. Too many schools are sited near industrial plants or toxic waste sites; some are sited on abandoned landfills. Many school facilities are poorly maintained. Schools are more densely occupied and more intensively used than office buildings, magnifying problems. Thousands of schools are severely overcrowded, which compromises ventilation systems, acoustics, food service, recess, and sanitation. Children also spend extra hours in school vehicles or buses when their schools are not served by safe routes. Despite the evidence, no state takes these factors into account.

The U.S. EPA has estimated that up to half of all schools have problems with indoor environmental quality.

Children and staff are all affected by:

- polluted indoor air and outdoor air
- toxic chemical and pesticide uses; chemical spills
- dampness and mold infestations
- asbestos, radon
- lead water and paint, school supplies
- poor chemical management
- poor siting, design, engineering
- hazardous materials purchased and stored onsite
- PCBs, mercury, and other toxics

### Results of unhealthy schools:

• All children are at risk of additional health and learning problems due solely to the unexamined and unaddressed threats in their schools AND the lack of public health services for children at risk or with suspected exposures.

Results include:

- child and staff illnesses and absenteeism
- asthma, allergies, headaches, fatigue, nausea, rashes and chronic illnesses
- Sick Building Syndrome/Building Related Illnesses
- more medication use by children and staff
- learning and behavior difficulties that worsen
- greater liability for school districts
- lower achievement

and, reduced average daily attendance revenues. Asthma is the leading cause of absenteeism from chronic illness. Asthma is also a leading work-related disease of teachers and custodians—they get it on the job.

### Coalition Position

When the nation is committed to raising academic performance and honoring each child's potential, and to improving the environment of every neighborhood, we have a **moral obligation** to protect all children and to accommodate children and personnel who already have impairments. All schools should:

- adopt high performance design and siting standards
- promote and sustain quality indoor air
- use safer cleaning and maintenance products
- use non-toxic products for instruction
- use safer pest and weed control
- provide quality lighting, including daylighting
- provide good acoustics
- select durable, easy-to-clean flooring
- offer wholesome food and exercise opportunities
- provide safe spaces for outdoor activities
- retrofit facilities for energy and water conservation
- remediate lead, PCBs, dampness.

**A powerful array of groups support new policies and actions to ensure all schools are environmentally safe and healthy, including parents, unions, educators, health and environment groups, and advocates for the millions of students in special education programs.**

## For children, health, environment, education, and communities, we support:

- ✦ **A President's Initiative and Budget that prioritizes children's environmental health by scaling up federal support for and directing EPA, CDC, and NIEHS to coordinate research and programs to protect children from environmental exposures in child care and in schools**
  - **Directs EPA** Indoor Environments Division and EPA Office of Children's Health Protection, **and CDC** National Center for Environmental Health and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, **with Education** and an **appointed advisory committee of child health experts**, to advance coordinated and effective programs with the states to address environmental health risks to children in schools and in child care and to reduce risks and benchmark prevention in those settings, as well as provide national and regional training and technical assistance grants to NGOs.
  - **Supports a new federal-state partnership grant program to provide environmental public health services** (tracking and interventions) **for children at risk or with suspected exposures in school and in child care**
  - **Supports federal funds for school and child care facility and transportation improvements** to P-12 schools and child care facilities, targeting those facility systems linked to providing buildings that are clean, dry, quiet, and have good lighting and indoor air; ensuring safe routes to schools; reducing proximity to or the impact of nearby hazardous facilities.

## State and Local Policy

- ✦ Promote, adopt, fund, and implement **healthy, high performance school facility design**. Factors include: facility oversight and safe siting; adequate, safe space for outdoor activities; low-emission construction materials; pollutant source controls; ventilation; durable and easy-to-clean surfaces and floors; moisture and mold controls; temperature and humidity controls; acoustics and noise controls; ergonomics; safety and security; daylighting (maximizing natural light); and energy conservation.
- ✦ Promote, adopt, and fund standards and programs to promote use of **environmentally preferable materials** for school construction, instruction, maintenance, and cleaning, such as **integrated pest management (IPM)** and **third party certified green cleaning products**
- ✦ Support and state agency programs **to reduce use or storage of toxic chemicals**, such as mercury, pesticides and solvents.
- ✦ **Remediate hazards** such as PCBs, asbestos, and lead in drinking water.
- ✦ Ensure that parents and employees have an active **"right to know"** about hazards.
- ✦ Ensure that all facilities are **fully accessible** to students and employees with asthma and environmental, learning, and physical disabilities and do **no further harm** their health.

**This continuing Coalition message sponsored by:** Alaska Community Action on Toxics; American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; American Lung Association; American Public Health Association; Association of Clinicians for the Underserved, Association of School Business Officials International Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America; Asthma Regional Council of New England; Beyond Pesticides; Children's Environmental Health Network; Healthy Children-Healthy World; Connecticut Foundation for Environmentally Safe Schools; Empire State Consumer Project; Environmental Defense; Funders Forum on Environment and Education; Healthy Kids: The Key to Basics (MA); Healthy Schools Network; Improving Kids Environment (IN); Institute for Health and the Environment at the University at Albany; Kids for Saving Earth; Learning Disabilities Association of America; Marin Golden Gate Learning Disabilities Association (CA); Maryland Environmental Health Network; Maryland Pesticide Action Network; Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health; Massachusetts Healthy Schools Network; National Association of School Nurses; Center for Environmental Health Strategies; National Education Association; National PTA; Natural Resources Defense Council; New Jersey Work Environment Council; New Jersey Environmental Federation; Oregon Environmental Council; Physicians for Social Responsibility; Public Education Network; Sierra Club–Environmental Justice & Community Partnerships Program; Twenty-first Century Schools Fund; West Harlem Environmental Action; and League of Conservation Voters, Washington, DC; National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners; **and hundreds more.**

**About the Coalition.** Convened in 2001, and coordinated by Healthy Schools Network, it provides the national forum and platform for healthy school environments, through networking conference calls, meetings, and joint reports and actions. For more information, see [www.healthyschools.org](http://www.healthyschools.org) >coalition.