

WHAT SCHOOL NURSES KNOW: WE NEED NEW LAWS TO CLEAN UP SCHOOLS

A survey sponsored by: Healthy Schools Network and NYS Association of School Nurses, May 2000 ©

SELECTED SURVEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

More than 200 of the 1,000 members of the NYS Association of School Nurses, Inc. (NYSASN) responded to a survey of the Healthy Schools Network, Inc. (HSNet) on school environmental needs. Some of the survey results are of key concern to the parent, environment, public health, and education groups that are the constituencies of HSNet, including NYSASN, parents, PTA's, educators, unions, environmentalists, American Lung Association, and other health groups across the state. We are reporting on selected results now; a full report will be available from HSNet and NYSASN this summer.

NYSASN did not ask its members to identify themselves or their schools, in part because some of its members would feel it unwise to disclose facts that might be misinterpreted and/or might jeopardize their jobs. The fear of workplace retaliation among school nurses may stun parents and amaze child health researchers, but it is not at all new to the organizations representing school personnel. It is an important and unexamined issue in the field of children's environmental health and safety at school.

The survey results offer further confirmation of the need for new legislation, specifically to address pesticide reduction and notification, and school nontoxic purchasing, bills pending in the State Legislature.

Of the 206 school nurses responding from 42 counties in New York State

*** 71% reported that they knew students at school whose learning, breathing, or behavior are being affected by indoor environmental pollutants at school, such as bus fumes, cleaning products, pesticides, or scented products (65% of nurses from Long Island's Nassau-Suffolk counties; 68%, from Orange-Rockland-Westchester counties north of New York City, hereinafter, N-S and O-R-W)**

*** 70% reported knowing school personnel whose performance was affected by environmental conditions (58%, N-S; 70%, O-R-W)**

DISCUSSION:

While 71% may seem high, it is under-reporting.

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, nearly one in 13 school-aged children has asthma; asthma is a major cause of school absenteeism—accounting nationally for more than 10 million missed school days per year. Children breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults and are especially vulnerable to pollutants. According to the American Lung Association, asthma can be caused or triggered by indoor air pollution. The US Government Accounting Office documented an epidemic on indoor air pollution in New York State schools in 1996. Last year, the New York City Healthy Schools Working Group's survey found that 15% of school users said they were sensitive to strong odors

and these odors made their health conditions worse.

"I have gone to the administration several times to stop the fumes from small engine

repair workshop in the basement from traveling up into the cafeteria."

"On cold days, one wing of our school...has a strong smell of fuel (from the buses) with complaints of headache and nausea from some staff."

*** 25% reported that their schools were not providing students with needed environmental 'accommodation', that is, controlling the school's own indoor environment to prevent health effects and to promote learning (20%, N-S; 32%, O-RW)**

*** 20% reported they did not know if any affected students were being assisted with environmental improvements or 'accommodation' (21% N-S; 16% O-R-W)**

DISCUSSION:

Schools are ignoring the law and ignoring cost-effective steps for healthier indoor environments.

Schools have a responsibility under federal law to search out children with health or learning problems, and an obligation to protect their health and safety, including the ability to

breathe at school. With stringent new statewide standards for learning required, every school official should realize that it is in the school's best interest to provide an indoor environment free from risky pollutants that affect learning.

Clearly schools must be required to follow

purchasing and maintenance practices that minimize pollutants in schools,

to protect the most vulnerable and to improve the environment for all school occupants .

* 21% reported they knew their schools were using insecticide sprays indoors (14%, N-S ; 28% O-R-W) and 32% reported they knew insecticide sprays were being used outside (17% N-S; 35% O-R-W)

* One quarter of the nurses responding statewide SAID THEY DID NOT KNOW if insecticide sprays were used indoors at school (17% N-S counties; 28% O-R-W counties); and one-third DID NOT KNOW if insecticides sprays were used outdoors (29% N-S counties; 43% O-R-W counties)

DISCUSSION:

Direct knowledge of insecticide spraying indoors at school would suggest that the toxic

applications are taking place during school hours.

Studies have shown that pesticides accumulate and persist indoors in carpets, plush toys, and other areas long after the original applications. Low-level exposures to pesticides commonly used by schools may resemble the flu, or headaches, rashes, nausea, and fatigue, complaints that are frequent among young children and often associated with 'school phobia'. Basic pest prevention and the use of caulking, baits, and traps are cheaper long-term than applied poisons, and cheaper than multiple trips to the school nurse and guidance counselor. Nurses' lack of information does not mean that no poisons were used.

Schools must be required to practice least-toxic pest control methods and provide prior notice of school pesticide use.

* Nurses also reported some schools have voluntarily reduced toxics use or tried to improve air quality:

35% of the nurses statewide reported that school had reduced pesticide use (40% N-S; 31% O-R-W)

29% reported school had switched cleaning products (31% N-S; 33% O-R-W) 28% reported schools had eliminated bathroom deodorizers (34% N-S; 19% O-R-W)

DISCUSSION:

Too little, too late.

Six years after the NYS Attorney General called for major reforms and five years after the NYS Board of Regents adopted a comprehensive, widely supported nontoxic pest control policy, few schools can document reduced pesticide use. In the interim, school construction dollars have doubled to over \$1 billion annual in state aid, and schools are using a promised \$230 million

in new Minor Maintenance and Repair funds.

"Children's health is more rhetoric than reality at our school."

"There was a school health & safety committee that met last year and...reported... to the Superintendent. Nothing happened except the committee was not re-activated..."

* 42% of nurses reported student inhaler use was higher than five years ago (50% of nurses from Nassau-Suffolk schools reported inhaler use higher than five years ago; 37% of nurses from Orange-Rockland-Westchester schools reported inhaler use higher than five years ago)

* 50% reported the number of students on medications to control Attention Deficit Disorder are higher than five years ago (43%, Nassau-Suffolk; 63%, Orange-Rockland-Westchester)

DISCUSSION:

"I have twice as many students to monitor as five years ago."

Schools are coping with student health, learning, and behavior problems they can't always control. But they can reduce the indoor environmental pollutants that are associated with or known to trigger these problems. "The nation is in the grip of a rapidly growing asthma epidemic whose victims will more than double by 2020," reported the Pew Environmental Health Commission at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, May 2000. Schools must prevent student health risks.

"I feel isolated as a health care professional in a 'teaching' facility...and my opinions are not given much consideration by school administrators."

"It's very hard to get help with our situation and many staff are out sick."

"The teachers are seeing increases in coughing and Upper Respiratory Infections

in (children in basement classes)."

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Sponsors.

The Healthy Schools Network, Inc. (HSNet) and the New York State Association of Schools Nurses, Inc. (NYSASN) carried out a survey of the members of NYSASN in February 2000. HSNet is a not for profit research, information, education, and coalition-building organization centered on children's environmental health and dedicated to improving the conditions and practices of schools. NYSASN is a voluntary, professional association of school nurses that seeks to improve the health, educational achievement, and quality of life for all children in New York State schools.

Survey purpose and limitations.

The purpose of the survey was to develop an overview of how school nurses viewed children's environmental health at school, and to find out how schools were responding to student's environmental health needs. The survey was not designed to identify specific schools or students with unmet environmental health needs, nor evaluate nurses' knowledge of or participation in school environmental management. Lack of school-based data means that the results cannot be compared to background rates on asthma or school performance.

Methodology.

The one-page questionnaire was drafted by the two sponsoring organizations; tabulations were prepared by the SUNY Albany Institute for Health and Environment, Rensselaer, NY. NYSASN mailed the survey to its 1,000 members on February 1; 212 were returned by mail to the sponsors then delivered to SUNY for tabulation in early March. The respondents were from 46 of the state's 62 counties, with strong representation from nurses in the metro area outside New York City (40 respondents from Orange, Rockland, and Westchester counties, and 36 from Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk counties); four were from New York City. Six surveys lacked a county identifier. Eighty-four percent (84%) of the returns were from nurses serving Pre-K to 8th grade students.

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