

Guide To

School Health And Safety Committees:

How to Promote Child And Adult Environmental Health Protection



Healthy Schools Network, Inc.

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New Law Creates Committees

As parents and school personnel, you have new rights to participate in securing health and safety improvements at school. Effective October 1999, all public and charter school districts in New York State (NYS), including Pre-K and BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) programs, must establish a Health and Safety Committee comprised of parents, representatives of bargaining units, and administrators.

Existing Health and Safety Committees do not need to be abolished. While private schools are not required to follow this law, many voluntarily form "facilities committees" to consider major construction or repair projects, or to promote school improvement projects, including recycling, nontoxic pest control, or energy efficiency.

The purpose of this Guide is to help parents and others create, support, and/or participate in these new Committees.

Health and Safety Committees Were Established in Response to Hazardous, Neglected Buildings and Poor Inspections

New York State enrolls some three million children in 4,200 classroom buildings, governed by 715 districts. The NYS Education Department does not inspect facilities; it issues Certificates of Occupancy based on school's self-reported fire safety inspections. The NYS Department of Health inspects only kitchens and pools. Over 25 percent of schools have self-reported indoor air pollution; most use highly toxic pesticides routinely. A 1999 Healthy Schools Network-sponsored survey of NYC schools found that laws to protect public health and safety were ignored, including laws for clean drinking water, sanitation, pest control, fire safety, and playgrounds. (For a copy of *Neglected Buildings, Damaged Health: A Snapshot of New York City Public School Environmental Conditions*, call HSN). No state agency records or reports on these problems. Only a handful of schools created state mandated five-year facilities plans, a fact that has stalled finding new funds for school facility health and safety repairs.

This is why Health and Safety Committees are so important. With schools serving as community centers, they become daily role models of how we value them, their education, and their community. Thriving neighborhoods have healthy, clean and attractive neighborhood public facilities — our schools need to follow suit.

New York State Law: How Health & Safety Committees Work

Health and Safety Committees are advisory to the local board of education and are appointed by the local board from a list of individuals nominated by their constituency groups. There is no size limit, but representatives of parents, bargaining units, staff and district officials must be appointed. As part of the full monitoring system created in the law, the committees are the “monitors” of school health and safety.

Committee Responsibilities:

- Participate in the annual visual inspection of the school. (The regulations also provide a waiver of liability for committee members).
- Consult on the school’s health and safety rating that assesses all major building systems and the effectiveness of the building maintenance plan. Among a wide variety of requirements, the maintenance plan must provide for the least toxic integrated pest management (IPM) and procedures to promote acceptable indoor air quality (IAQ).
- Participate in resolving health and safety complaints, including reviewing written responses to complainants.
- Monitor safety during school construction. The district must give the Committee an opportunity to conduct a “walk-through” inspection in the post-construction period to confirm the area is ready for re-use.

Recommended Actions for the Committee:

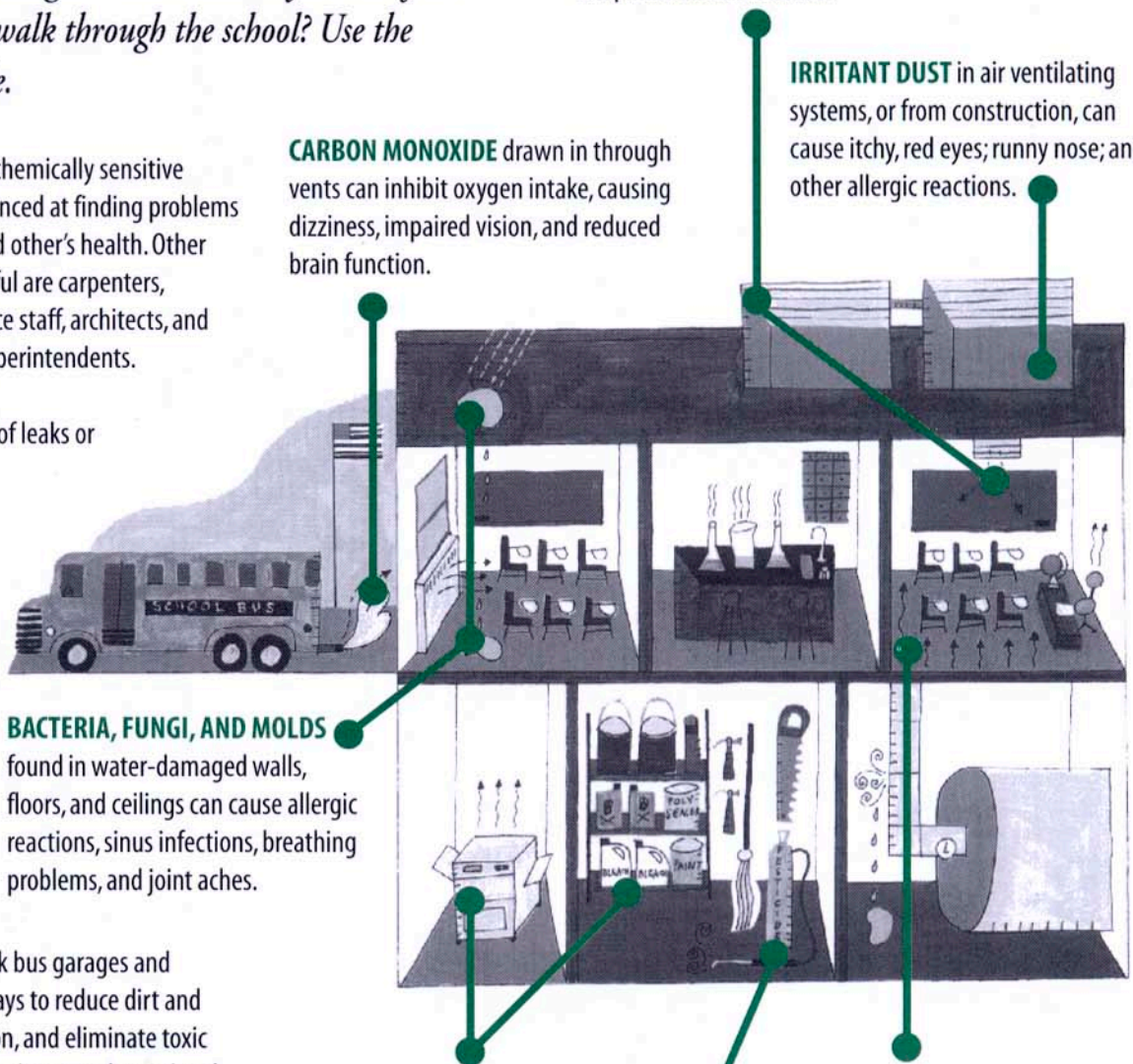
- Invite others to attend committee meetings, such as parents, teachers, etc. Committees are subject to the NY Open Meetings Act and are therefore public. *(For our factsheet on using the NY Open Meetings Law for access to school-related meetings, call HSN).*
- Be familiar with what the school is required to do and how the committee should be involved *(For a copy of the regulations, call HSN);*
- Specifically, every five years, schools are required by the law to prepare “five-year capital facilities plans” and conduct “building condition surveys” and “annual inspections.” Ask to see the plan and the result of the surveys and inspections. They are *public documents* that can be used by the committees to guide them in understanding and prioritizing health and safety issues. If school officials are unwilling to give them to you, *call HSN for our “Right-to-Know” factsheet on using the NY Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) to obtain information.*
- The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has created “Tools for Schools,” a self-help kit that provides an easy, low-cost approach (including a manual and checklists) to finding and solving school indoor air quality problems. *(For more information, call HSN. To order a copy, call your local BOCES or the EPA at (202) 512-1800 or fax (202) 512-2250.)*
- Conduct a school “walk-through” and “health survey.”



Getting Started: The School Walk-through

The best way to learn about school facilities is to participate in a school "walk-through." What should you look for or think about as you walk through the school? Use the schematic as a guide.

- Asthmatic, allergic, and chemically sensitive people are often experienced at finding problems that affect their own and other's health. Other people who can be helpful are carpenters, custodial and food service staff, architects, and experienced building superintendents.
- Problems are related. Roof leaks or dripping pipes can lead to rot, mold contamination, or create pest entryways. Pest problems are best controlled by building repairs and human behavior controls rather than toxic pesticide applications.
- TIPS: Check closets. Check bus garages and playgrounds. Look for ways to reduce dirt and noise, improve ventilation, and eliminate toxic products. Make sure art, science, and vocational education areas have safe equipment and supplies. Pre-K, day care, elementary and some special education or health-impaired students are the most environmentally vulnerable. Check across the hall, next door, or in the basement under children's class areas. Keep your own notes and ask for explanations.



CARBON MONOXIDE drawn in through vents can inhibit oxygen intake, causing dizziness, impaired vision, and reduced brain function.

INADEQUATE FRESH AIR can cause sleepiness and headaches.

IRRITANT DUST in air ventilating systems, or from construction, can cause itchy, red eyes; runny nose; and other allergic reactions.

BACTERIA, FUNGI, AND MOLDS found in water-damaged walls, floors, and ceilings can cause allergic reactions, sinus infections, breathing problems, and joint aches.

VOLATILE ORGANIC COMPOUNDS (VOCs) used in copiers, cleaners, solvents, and paints can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation; headaches, and dizziness.

FORMALDEHYDE in new carpeting, vinyl flooring, or furniture may cause burning and itching of the nose and eyes.

Chronic exposure to some **PESTICIDES** can result in damage to the liver, kidneys, and nervous system.

Reprinted from Good Housekeeping; Illustration by Linda Helton Design

THE HEALTH SURVEY

The “front office” always seems to be “the last to know.” The Health & Safety Committee can, by law, review all written complaints and responses on building conditions. Your committee can start by asking building occupants before they complain.

Occupant health surveys can be an inexpensive way of quickly targeting the most troublesome spots in a building. There is no single, standard survey to use for school occupants. Health symptoms such as headaches, nausea, itchy eyes, rashes, concentration or memory problems, etc. that arise only on school days or only in certain areas of the building or bus areas are of concern.

Healthy Schools Network Information For Your School Walk-through

- *Healthier Cleaning and Maintenance Practices and Products for Schools*
- *Children, Learning and Poisons Don't Mix: Kick the Pesticide Habit*
- *Parent Guide to Indoor Air Quality*
- *Idling School Buses: A Factsheet on the Hazards of Diesel Fumes*
- *Guide to School Health and Safety Committees: How to Promote Child and Environmental Health Protection*
- *Guide to School Renovation and Construction: What You Need to Know to Protect Child and Adult Environmental Health*
- *Right-to-Know Factsheet: Using NYS Freedom of Information and Education Laws*
- *Access to Decision-Making Factsheet: Using the NYS Open Meetings Law*

Please go to www.hsnet.org for links to other organizations that can help you and your committee.



Insider's Guide to Common Terms and Public Documents

- **AHERA (Asbestos Plan):** Federally required plan updated every three years and filed with the State Education Department that identifies and manages asbestos and asbestos-containing materials (ACM).
- **Annual Visual Inspection:** Inspects all the major systems previously covered by a fire safety inspection and reviews the Five Year Building Condition Survey.
- **Certificate of Occupancy, CO:** Annually given to schools that self-report passing building inspection.
- **DOSH 900:** A standardized report of employee illnesses and injuries that is made public every February.
- **Emergency Management Plan:** Schools are required to have a current plan for emergency problems such as fires, chemical spills, hurricanes, bomb threats, and other disasters.
- **Five-Year Building Condition Survey:** All schools must have this survey prepared by a licensed architect or engineer and sent to the State Education Department.
- **Indoor Air Quality, IAQ:** There is no single, legally enforceable standard that guarantees breathable air.
- **Least Toxic Integrated Pest Management, IPM:** A system that uses building repairs and clean-ups to control pests, and selects the least toxic pesticide only after prevention has failed.
- **Material safety data sheets, MSDS:** Specify health hazards of products in use, and their safe handling and disposal must be on file in the building.
- **Preventive Maintenance Plan:** Schools must have plans that specify how and how often building systems are maintained. Such plans are key to promoting IAQ and keeping pests and pesticides away from children.
- **Public Employee Safety and Health, PESH:** A set of state Department of Labor regulations protecting employees (federally, Occupational Safety and Health Act). There are NO regulations that take the special vulnerabilities of children into account.

“Guiding Principles” A Clear Mission for All of Us

- Every child and school employee has a right to an environmentally safe and healthy learning environment that is clean and in good repair.
- Every student, parent and employee has a right to know about environmental health issues and hazards in their school environment.
- Schools should serve as role models of environmentally responsible behavior.
- Federal, state, and local public and private entities need to work together to effectively and efficiently use resources.
- School officials and appropriate public agencies should be held accountable for environmentally safe and healthy learning environments.

Adopted by the New York State Board of Regents in 1994, the *“Guiding Principles of Schools Environmental Quality”* (above) lay a foundation for fixing facility problems and protecting student and personnel health and safety. Since then, local school districts and other groups have adopted them as their own. We recommend that your district or committee adopt these *Guiding Principles*. They set a high goal for your school.

A Message For Prospective Members Of The Health And Safety Committee

Parents are the change agents of schools and have the greatest stake in the health and safety of their children. They are the voice of children who are uniquely vulnerable to environmental hazards and they vote at budget time and for local school board seats. While school personnel are often the first to spot hazards, they may fear job retaliation for “rocking the boat.” Parents, however, do not have this obstacle and have substantial power in promoting change. As volunteers, parents have eliminated pesticides from school buildings and grounds, raised money for better playgrounds, insisted on breathable indoor air, and stopped dangerous siting or construction projects.

The **Board of Education** can use the committee in its advisory capacity to build support for the facility program. The most dedicated and alert appointees are likely to be parents of children with asthma, allergies, or chemical sensitivities. Involve them and their school personnel counterparts.

Providing a safe and healthful school environment is not as simple as it used to be for **school superintendents and officials**. Some changes require no money and may, in fact, cost less. Other recommendations may indicate the need for capital investment. “Asthma-proofing” your school with an Indoor Air Quality-oriented clean-up and fewer toxic products could result in better attendance.

The **staff unions** — New York State United Teachers, National Education Association, and Civil Service Employees together represent hundreds of thousands of school employees in New York. School personnel may be the first to see a hazard, and can call in occupational health experts. School health and safety is for everyone. Information developed by unions should be used to benefit everyone, not held for contract bargaining.

As a **school facility director or head custodian**, this is your committee. Your open and constructive participation and leadership can make or break this committee. Be the first to offer a school facility tour or “walk-through.” Open storage closets; show notebooks of Material Safety Data Sheets; point to water damage; demonstrate ventilating systems; explain maintenance costs per square foot; phase out the use of polluting products that can trigger asthma or contribute to indoor pollution.

State regulations make no reference to including **students, community members or nurses** in the committee. Your Board of Education may or may not feel your participation is a good investment. Smaller committees can work more quickly than large ones; meetings of the committee are public and the committee reports to the board. We strongly recommend that students serve on the committees or observe the meetings, then report to others through the school newspaper or student government association.

A good **Health and Safety Committee member** works with other people, listens, learns, and provides advice. S/he places the highest priority on child and adult environmental health and safety. If you have bargaining/contract problems or parent-teacher conflicts, do not bring them to this committee. Keep your work clean and your head clear. When in doubt, always ask for documentation. Stay focused on environmental results that benefit children, personnel, and the community. Take notes, attend meetings, ask questions, do not gossip — and do what you know is right.

Children's Environmental Health: What You and Your Committee Need to Know

Children are not just little adults — no news to parents or school personnel! What is new, however, is that because children are not biologically little adults they are more vulnerable than adults to environmental health and safety hazards.

Children breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults; they eat and drink proportionately more, and often a narrower range of foods; they play closer to or on the ground or floor and may engage in hand-to-mouth behaviors. They cannot recognize hazards and cannot protect themselves from them.

(Sources: National Academy of Sciences, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, US Environmental Protection Agency, National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.)



Schools are, on average, four times as densely occupied as office spaces and children spend most of their time inside the school building — from an early morning bus pick-up through to after-school programs, sometimes leaving at dinner time. Other children have all their meals at school, yet facility maintenance for children's safety is not mandated in New York or most other states. While schools in New York are now required to have preventive maintenance plans, they are not required to publicly report pupil accident, illness or injury. Schools are not required to hire school nurses.

For Our Out-of-State Readers

Children's environmental health vulnerability is of national concern. The hazardous conditions of schools nationally were documented by the US Government Accounting Office (1995) and the US Department of Education (1999). To solve statewide problems, you may need new legislation or regulations. To solve local school district problems, add an environmental health agenda to your school's existing committee structure, or ask your school to voluntarily create a health and safety committee.

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