



Coalition *for* Healthier Schools

*...providing the national platform and
the forum for environmental health at school, since 2001...*

Coordinated by Healthy Schools Network

January 14, 2025

Support Federal Healthy Schools Programs *A Transition Plan for US EPA and Other Agencies*

Improve Kids' Health and Learning and the Well-Being of Working Parents

Preface: Kids at Risk Every Day

President Trump proposed \$50M in his first term for US EPA's Healthy Schools programs that will help reduce the crisis in children's health and learning. A new commitment is needed to protect our nation's children from unhealthy school facilities.

Deteriorated, poor-quality indoor environments in schools adversely affect children's health, thinking, learning, and behavior, in schools, early learning centers, and childcare. Communities enduring the most poverty often have the most children with asthma. They also have the schools in the worst condition. Rural-remote schools often have the added challenge of recruiting technical consultants to assess building issues. Working parents struggling to provide for their children do not need extra concerns about their children's health at school; it is costly to take extra time off from work when children have asthma attacks at school.

No one wants more school closures, yet they sometimes happen. Schools are the largest form of public construction after highways. There are more schools than zip codes! But the increase in extreme weather events costing billions in emergency funding and the risk of colds and flu and infectious diseases are disruptive, if not devastating, to school schedules and operations.

There must be strong coordination across the agencies. While US EPA has congressional authorizations, voluntary guidance, and staff expertise on managing healthy school buildings and grounds, other agencies (CDC, Energy, Education) have launched new work with little coordination with EPA, which has some 30 years of successes in this field. Ignoring field-tested expertise is no way to solve problems. Federal funds should be used to maximize health benefits for children and school employees.

Below, a snapshot of decades-old unresolved issues and long-ignored impacts.

ABOUT CHILDREN

- 49.6M Children/youth in public schools
- 7.3M Children in IDEA (15%)
- 27.5M Children/youth of color (55%)
- 49% Free/Reduced Price Meals
- 11% Asthma
- 5% Uninsured
- 40% of all school-age children have one or more chronic health conditions

ABOUT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- 98,000 public schools
- 8 Bn ft2 valued at \$3Tr & not ready for extreme weather
- 40% all schools need new HVAC
- 28% need new roofing
- 12+% have existing structural damage
- 31% use portable classrooms
- Schools are more densely occupied than nursing homes
- Estimated 95% occupants are women and children

New Leadership, New Opportunities

The US needs a comprehensive plan and funding to ensure healthy learning places for all children and youth, and to help recruit and retain teaching and support staff. Coordinated federal funding for states and local districts is desperately needed, especially in rural-remote and disadvantaged communities.

- The comprehensive plan must address bringing deteriorated school facilities into good repair, and ensuring schools are able to stay open or reopen safely and quickly in the face of extreme heat, other severe weather events, and infectious disease outbreaks (colds, flu, novel viruses).
- This includes:
 - expanding EPA's voluntary guidance and education and training grants to states, tribes, universities, and NGOs, crucial to achieving high quality indoor air/environments in schools and facility resiliency to weather events; and,
 - providing federal funds to rebuild schools that are linked to EPA's guidance on siting, designing, and maintaining healthy learning places for children and youth.

Action Elements for Healthier Learning Places

1. **Ensure Clean Air and Healthy Children in Schools: Scale Up EPA Voluntary Healthy Schools/Healthy Children Programs with \$110M annually.**

- a) **\$100M/year – Support EPA’s Office of Air and Radiation/Indoor Environments Division** (\$100M annually for ten years), to lead a national educational campaign and host annual symposia to scale up education, outreach, and technical assistance in states/schools/districts/communities, through grants to state, tribes, and NGOs, focused on how to prevent or quickly identify and resolve indoor environmental issues; and,
- b) **\$10M/year – Support EPA’s Office of Children’s Health Protection** (\$10M annually for ten years) to sustain cross-agency leadership on children’s environment and health issues, to support federal interagency research, and to support outreach to the medical and public health communities.

2. **Keeping Schools Open Safely Disaster Guidance: Direct EPA**, advised by CDC, FEMA, and Education, to develop and issue guidance on steps schools should take to help them stay open longer and/or reopen safely and quickly after disasters. Schools that have channeled water away from buildings may be able to reopen quickly; schools that have improved ventilation and cleaning may not need to close due to cold and flu infections. High heat days that block learning and drop test scores are increasing. Resiliency to extreme weather is more essential than ever.



In the 2022-23 school year, this Berks County (PA) rural high school was closed due to damage from extreme weather. Students and staff missed school days and spent more hours travelling.

3. **Direct EPA to Develop and Issue Model Infection Prevention and Control Plans, advised by CDC and Education**, for districts to adopt advised by their state and local health agencies. Plans should address providing clean/fresh air, clean water, clean facilities, well-maintained systems, and weather resiliency, and grants should go to state agencies, to the nation’s largest school districts, and to schools with high absenteeism or high asthma rates.

Clean air and clean facilities will reduce asthma, improve attendance, and the reduce the spread of illnesses, helping to keep schools open in flu season,.



Children breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults.

This classroom has high carbon dioxide levels which can cause fatigue, poor concentration, or dizziness. Adult critical thinking skills start to decline at 1,000 parts per million CO₂; the meter shows over 4,000 ppm.

- 4. Direct EPA Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention**, advised by Labor and HHS, to **get legacy toxics out of schools.** EPA should develop and issue an overall action plan for legacy toxics commonly found in schools, including updated guidance and grant funding to assist schools in eliminating toxics: PCBs, PFAs (“forever chemicals”) in water and soil, lead in paint and water, asbestos, mercury, pesticides, and old stores of laboratory and maintenance toxics.



NYS Department of Environmental Conservation’s school chemical clean-out project yielded from one high school a trove of outdated, mislabeled chemicals that must be identified, sorted, and then transported for proper disposal.

Chemical spills also close schools and endanger students, staff, and first responders.

The Impact of Extended School Closures ***Selected COVID School Closure Data Reports***

- 26% of 8th graders proficient at math (v 33% in 2019) = 15-24 weeks behind in math
- 32% of 4th graders proficient at reading (v 34%) = 9 weeks behind in reading
- 30% chronically absent (v 16%)
- 40% have had one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)
- 27% more children diagnosed with depression in 2020 than in 2016

5. **Direct Education to Track and Report School Closures and Emergency Evacuations**, by duration and cause, and including numbers and the socio-economic status of children and youth affected.
6. **Direct NIH/CDC to Establish an Environmental Public Health System for Children**, with state and city health agencies, to track and intervene for children at risk or with suspected environmental exposures in their learning places. Asthma is the single largest cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. *Example: NIOSH tracks work-related asthma; NIH should establish tracking of children and youth with “school-related asthma.”*

Who Benefits from Healthier School Buildings?

Children and Youth, Families

Better health, thinking, and learning

Working Parents

Fewer work absences; fewer medical bills

School Personnel

Better working conditions; better health for teachers, nurses, and other support staff

Rural-Remote and Other Communities

Free guidance and technical assistance; faster recovery from disasters

Labor/Local Trades to Repair Schools

More jobs for building trades: plumbers, masons, electricians, roofers, carpenters, insulators, sheet metal workers, facility workers

Federal Budget

Reduced health care costs; fewer disaster deaths, illnesses, and trauma; faster recoveries

RESOURCES

- [US GAO report 1995, School Facilities: Condition of America’s Schools](#)
- [US GAO 2020 report, K-12 Education: School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacement](#)

- [US GAO 2022 report, Disaster Recovery: COVID-19 Pandemic Intensifies Disaster Recovery Challenges for K-12 Schools](#)
- Healthy Schools Network and New Jersey Work Environment Council, [The Pandemic v. Schools: States Must Guide Schools in Reopening, Slowing Virus](#) (Infection Prevention and Control Plans)
- [Annie E. Casey Foundation 2024 Kids Count Data Book](#)
- [McKinsey & Company, COVID-19 Learning Delay and Recovery: Where Do US States Stand?](#)
- [BASIC \(Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition\)](#)
- [EPA, Climate Change and Children's Health](#)
- [EPA, Preventing the Spread of Respiratory Viruses in Public Indoor Spaces](#)
- [White House Summit on Extreme Heat](#)
- [US Department of Education Disaster Recovery Unit \(DRU\) cost report](#)
- American Public Health Association, health policy statement, [Preparing US Schools for the Next Public Health Disaster: Lessons Learned From COVID-19](#)
- American Public Health Association, health policy statement, [Establishing Environmental Public Health Systems for Children at Risk or With Environmental Exposures in Schools](#)
- Health Resources and Services Administration data brief, [National Survey of Children's Health: Adolescent and Behavioral Health 2023](#)

For more information:

Claire L. Barnett, Healthy Schools Network, cbarnett@healthyschools.org, 202-543-7555

Supporting Organizations

21st Century Schools Fund
 Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments
 Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
 AVANCE (TX)
 Children's Environmental Health Network
 Coalition for Environmentally Safe Schools (WA)
 Coalition for Healthier Schools
 Comunidades Sin Fronteras (CT)
 Connecticut Education Association (CT)
 Connecticut Foundation for Environmentally Safe Schools (CT)
 Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs (CT)
 Earth Day Network
 First Focus
 Healthy Schools Caucus
 Healthy Schools Network (NY and national)
 Maryland Children's Environmental Health Coalition (MD)
 National Association of School Nurses
 New York League of Conservation Voters (NY)
 Project Green Schools
 Quality First, EHS, Inc. (NC)

Responsible Purchasing Network
Selah Natural Medicine (OR)
Society for Public Health Education
Take Care of Your Classroom Air (TX)
Until Justice Partners (KY)
Women for a Healthy Environment (PA)
WE ACT for Environmental Justice (NY and national)

Pamela Pugh, PhD, President, Michigan State Board of Education (MI)
Richard Shaughnessy, PhD, Director of UTulsa Indoor Air Quality Research Program
(TUIAP), University of Tulsa (OK)