

THE ABCs OF HEALTHY SCHOOLS



Ask Questions, Be a Voice for Children, Create a Healthy School Environment

■ Toxic Exposures

Every day at school, some 53 million students and five million staff are exposed to lead, radon, asbestos, chemical fumes, pesticides, molds, and other toxins. A recent survey of 206 school nurses in New York State revealed 71% knew students whose learning, health, or behavior was affected by indoor environmental contaminants. [NYSASN] Our nation's 115,000 schools need over \$250 billion for urgent repairs and new classrooms, but there are no federal laws or direct funds to address environmental health conditions in schools. [US GAO; NEA]

■ Indoor Air Pollution

Federal studies show an epidemic of indoor air quality problems at schools that can trigger asthma, a leading cause of school absences and occupational illness among teachers. Indoor air pollution can also cause headaches, eyes/nose/throat irritation, coughing, rashes, learning problems, respiratory diseases, and allergies. Even though indoor air pollution is one of the top five human health hazards in our country, there are still no enforceable indoor air quality standards.

■ Children's Health

Increases in childhood diseases, hyperactivity, learning disabilities, and lower IQs have been linked with exposure to toxins typically found at schools. In 2001-02, over 1,000 students from 27 states had mysterious rashes that started at school. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) investigated and reported 'applied chemicals' and hazardous renovation dusts caused some of the rashes. Schools are not required to report student illnesses or injury, and some have refused onsite investigations of unexplained illnesses. [CDC, HSN]

■ Healthy High Performance Schools

Schools designed and constructed using low toxicity materials, and maintained to promote air quality, are proven to boost test scores and the overall health of students. However, there are no government requirements to build these "healthier" schools, and almost no state laws that prohibit schools from being built on or near sources of pollution, such as toxic waste sites.

BE SAFE: Take Precautionary Action to Protect Our Children's Health at School

BE SAFE's FOUR PRINCIPLES

1. HEED EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Early warning signs of environmental problems at schools are not always obvious, and there is no system in place for routine oversight of school conditions or public notice of hazards. Some common sources of toxins in schools include cleaning supplies, pesticide sprays, paints, glues, strippers used in renovation and repair work, fumes from copiers and computers, mold, lead-based paint, asbestos insulation, and radon. Air pollution from nearby factories, major highways, hazardous waste sites and chemical storage facilities can also drift in and accumulate inside a school.

How can we address the growing numbers of children and adults who are sick or unable to achieve their full potential because they spend day after day in an unhealthy learning and work environment? We can heed these early warning signs and prevent illness and learning difficulties by taking a precautionary approach to prevent hazardous school conditions.

2. PUT SAFETY FIRST

Schools are children's "workplaces", and should have high standards of protection from toxic exposures. You would not think of giving a child the same dosage of medication as an adult, and yet our schools expose children to toxins at levels known to be harmful to adults. Children are much more vulnerable to toxic exposures. They eat, drink, touch, breathe and explore their environment more than adults, and absorb more of some toxins such as lead.

School officials have a responsibility to provide a safe and healthy environment for children. Schools need to put children's health and safety first and take precautions to prevent toxic exposures. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Preventing environmental problems is easier and cheaper than remediating hazards after they have made people sick.

3. EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Federal, state, and local officials responsible for our children's education need to provide a safe school environment free of health hazards. Schools can provide employees and families with 'Right-To-Know' information on toxic exposures, such as pesticide use. They can form Environmental Health Committees or community groups to investigate problems, recommend, and implement solutions. At the state level, officials must fund cleanups of known hazards such as asbestos and molds, use alternatives to spraying pesticides, and encourage green purchasing and building design. [See *Pesticides* and *Green Building* Brochures] Federal officials need to develop standards for school indoor air quality, provide funds for renovations and 'healthy and high performance schools' programs, and ensure schools are not built near contaminated sites or polluting industries.

4. CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTIONS

■ Does Your Child's School Use Toxic Cleaners & Pesticides?

Ask. Urge them to use nontoxic alternatives. For information, visit www.beyondpesticides.org, www.childproofing.org and www.healthyschools.org.

■ Is Your Child's School & Playground Safe?

Walk around the school and grounds. Photograph and report needed repairs and ask if the playground equipment is made with arsenic-treated lumber. For help, visit www.childproofing.org, www.healthyschools.org, and www.healthybuilding.net/arsenic_wood.html.

■ Are There Indoor Air Pollution Problems?

Walk your child's walk through the school. Note any odors, dirty carpets, signs of pests, molds, etc. and report to school officials. For help, visit www.healthyschools.org, the federal EPA IAQ Tools for Schools www.epa.gov/schools; and Dept. of Education at www.edfacilities.org/rl/healthy_schools.cfm

■ BE SAFE.

Sign on to the BE SAFE Platform. Be counted when we deliver this national Platform to the White House in 2005. Endorse the BE SAFE Platform today at www.besafenet.com.

■ Your Vote Counts.

The next election will set the country's course on healthy school policies. For information on environmental voting records, contact www.sierraclub.org and www.lcv.org. To register to vote, contact www.earthday.net.

PARENTS & TEACHERS UNITE TO MAKE HEALTHIER SCHOOLS

New York, NY Schools of Ground Zero.

Parent Association volunteers were the only barrier to stop children from being exposed to contaminants from a re-occupancy of contaminated schools after 9/11. No school had a rehearsed evacuation plan and no city, state, or federal agency was responsible to address this problem. With only cursory cleanups of heavy dust now known to have contained pulverized glass, cement, lead, and asbestos, Stuyvesant High School was re-opened shortly after 9/11. When the high school's Parent Association lost an early battle to purge the school of particulates coming through the ventilation system, parents at other schools took the only preventive step left-- they voted not to reoccupy their schools until full cleanups were done and confirmed.

Girard, Ohio

Children attending a new school in 2000 began coming home sick with serious upper respiratory infections. Parents and teachers formed the Girard Concerned Parents Group (GCPG) and investigated the cause. Chemicals off gassing from carpets, paints and other new products, combined with a serious mold problem due to a leaking system, had created a "sick building." The group organized and pressured the school district to take action, which led to the school being closed for necessary remediation. "Throughout Ohio, indoor air quality issues are now more quickly addressed so that schools do not become another Girard," said Cathy Ross, a GCPG leader. Today, parents have successfully urged the district to adopt a preventive indoor air quality program and are working with their state legislator to pass laws that would provide improved indoor air quality for all of Ohio's schools.

References:

NYS Association of School Nurses [NYSASN] May 2000 Survey; US Government Accounting Office [GAO] 1996, *The Condition of America's Schools*; National Education Association [NEA] 2000 Survey and current enrollment from USD Education's National Center for Education Statistics; Center for Disease Control [CDC], *CDC MMWR Investigation Report*, June 2002; Healthy Schools Network [HSN] 2002 Communications with Senate and EPA; and Sustainable Buildings Industry Council [SBIC], *High Performance School Buildings Resource & Strategy Guide*.

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BE SAFE Platform

In the 21st century, we envision a world in which our food, water and air are clean, and our children grow up healthy and thrive. Everyone needs a protected, safe community and workplace, and natural environment to enjoy. We can make this world vision a reality. The tools we bring to this work are prevention, safety, responsibility and democracy.

Our goal is to prevent pollution and environmental destruction before it happens. We support this precautionary approach because it is preventive medicine for our environment and health. It makes sense to:

- *Prevent pollution and make polluters, not taxpayers, pay and assume responsibility for the damage they cause;*
- *Protect our children from chemical and radioactive exposures to avoid illness and suffering;*
- *Promote use of safe, renewable, non-toxic technologies;*
- *Provide a natural environment we can all enjoy with clean air, swimmable, fishable water and stewardship for our national forests.*

We choose a “better safe than sorry” approach motivated by caution and prevention. We endorse the common-sense approach outlined in the BE SAFE’s four principles listed below.

Platform Principles

HEED EARLY WARNINGS

Government and industry have a duty to prevent harm, when there is credible evidence that harm is occurring or is likely to occur—even when the exact nature and full magnitude of harm is not yet proven.

PUT SAFETY FIRST

Industry and government have a responsibility to thoroughly study the potential for harm from a new chemical or technology before it is used—rather than assume it is harmless until proven otherwise. We need to ensure it is safe now, or we will be sorry later. Research on impacts to workers and the public needs to be confirmed by independent third parties.

EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Precautionary decisions place the highest priority on protecting health and the environment, and help develop cleaner technologies and industries with effective safeguards and enforcement. Government and industry decisions should be based on meaningful citizen input and mutual respect (the golden rule), with the highest regard for those whose health may be affected and for our irreplaceable natural resources—not for those with financial interests. Uncompromised science should inform public policy.

CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION

Decision-making by government, industry and individuals must include an evaluation of alternatives, and the choice of the safest, technically feasible solutions. We support innovation and promotion of technologies and solutions that create a healthy environment and economy, and protect our natural resources.

Take precautionary action to protect our children’s health at school. Sign onto the BE SAFE Platform.

Be counted when we deliver this national platform to the White House in 2005. Endorse the platform today at www.besafenet.com

BE SAFE is coordinated by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. To sign the platform or for more information, contact us at CHEJ, P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040, 703-237-2249, or 518-732-4538, or visit www.besafenet.com

