

SCHOOL HAZARD FACTS FOR FAMILIES

UNITE FOR HEALTHY SCHOOLS

School Hazards Hurt Health and Learning

Hazards in New Jersey schools affect large numbers of people and communities. New Jersey has 1.37 million students and 197,970 staff in 2,492 school buildings in 590 school districts. The state and school districts don't provide enough money to routinely maintain all these schools or build new ones when needed. Even urgently needed repairs are often not done. This is especially true in the 31 poorest districts in New Jersey, which depend on the Schools Development Authority (SDA) for funding.

Students, along with the whole school population – family visitors and volunteers, custodial and maintenance workers, food service workers, secretaries, security officers, bus drivers, teachers, paraeducators, and administrators – are potentially exposed to a wide array of hidden, and not so hidden, school hazards. National experts say that schools are one of our most hazardous indoor environments. Every day students, teachers, and other staff miss school or are less productive because exposures to hazards in the school affect their health.

Schools are up to four times more densely occupied than many offices, putting heavy demands on ventilation, mechanical, electrical, structural, and plumbing systems and on maintenance and cleaning staff. School hazards include disrepair, poor ventilation, temperatures too hot or cold, mold and moisture, toxic materials, dust and dirt, germs, pests and pesticides, poor lighting, construction and renovation-related hazards,



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and environmental hazards from nearby factories, contaminated sites, and bus and truck exhaust.

A child's developing organ systems are highly sensitive to toxic exposures. Children are often more heavily exposed because they have more hand to mouth contact than adults and play on the ground more. Unhealthy schools trigger asthma attacks, allergies, headaches, fatigue, nausea, rashes, and chronic illnesses. Asthma is the leading cause of children's absence from school.

Breathlessness, coughing, wheezing, and chest tightness characterize these attacks.

The good news is that hazards at school can be controlled and harm to health and learning prevented.

A healthy school will reduce both student and staff illness, absenteeism, and nurse office visits. Studies have linked healthy schools to greater comfort, which may lead to higher academic performance. A well-maintained building can reduce maintenance and energy costs and ensure compliance with various regulations. Liability risk and public relations can also be improved.

Research has shown that a good supply of fresh outdoor air, operable windows, natural light, and teacher access to temperature controls improve student health and performance. It is important that all New Jersey schools have these features.

STRENGTH IN UNITY

A united effort by both families and school staff is needed to improve New Jersey schools. Together we can develop a common agenda. Families and staff can partner with other groups in the community to build networks and have a bigger impact. Much good help is available. For example, see the ten advocacy groups, two unions, and a dozen state and federal government agencies and their websites in a companion factsheet titled, *Top School Health and Safety Websites*.

WHY FAMILIES?

- **Protection of Children.** Families are rightfully protective of their children and will work hard to ensure they are safe and healthy. These efforts also help safeguard school staff.

- **Numbers.** There are more families than school staff. Numbers can mean power, especially during school board elections or when families speak out about issues.
- **Expertise.** Many families have special training in engineering, architecture, medicine, nursing, construction – expertise that can benefit staff and students alike.
- **Student Involvement.** Families can also play an important role in encouraging older students to be involved.

WHY SCHOOL STAFF?

- **Legal Rights.** One or more unions represent school staff in New Jersey public school districts and have important legal rights. These include union rights to safety information and to file a complaint and trigger an inspection by the NJ Public Employee Safety and Health Program (PEOSH). Unions also negotiate contracts that can include language to provide protections against health and safety hazards.
- **Information.** School staff is in the school every day and experience the conditions and any health problems.
 - *Nurses see health problems*
 - *Maintenance workers see facility problems*
 - *Teachers and paraeducators see classroom problems*
 - *Bus drivers see vehicle problems.*
- **Self-Protection.** Staff has their own health at stake when schools are unhealthy or hazardous.
- **Protection of Children.** School staff care deeply about students and know that anything they can do to make a school healthier helps safeguard them.

This factsheet is one of a series prepared for the Healthy Schools Now Coalition by the New Jersey Work Environment Council, 7 Dunmore Ave, First Floor East, Ewing, NJ 08618, (609) 882-6100. Funded in part by the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey.

Healthy Schools Now is a coalition of parents, educators, students and public school advocates dedicated to ensuring that all New Jersey children and school employees learn and work in safe, modern school buildings.

First Edition – October 2014

