



Safe Schools Agenda

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Route to:
_ Superintendent
_ School Business Off.
_ Athletic Director
_ Supt. Bldgs/Grounds
_ Site Administrators
_ Transportation Dir.
_ Lunch Director
_ Classroom Teachers
_ _____

A monthly service provided to help you with your efforts to make your school safe for students, staff and the public

EPA Shows the Way to Healthy Indoor Air for School Children

An article in the November, 2003 issue of Education Week titled "Increasing Numbers of Schools are Grappling with Mold Problems" got my attention. According to the article, more than 10,000 mold related lawsuits are now pending, representing a 300 per cent increase since 1999. We have seen a significant increase in claims from school districts that receive this newsletter. We have written about toxic mold in previous issues (January, 2003 and April 2002,) but this latest alert caused us to take a good look at the Environmental Protection Agency's "Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools" program. It is terrific.

The Poor IAQ Effect on Students and Staff:

Healthy indoor air in schools is important not just because the alternative might lead to a lawsuit. Poor indoor air quality places students and staff at risk for health problems such as asthma and allergies. Five million children, 11% of the U.S. child population, have asthma. They miss 10 million school days a year. In schools, triggers for asthma attacks are animal dander, cockroach allergens and molds. Pollen, ozone and some chemical products and cleaners found in schools can also irritate the respiratory system. Exhaust fumes are also bronchial irritants.

Poor indoor air quality can also lead to headaches, dizziness, sleepiness and other conditions that can affect learning and performing in school. It can also reduce the ability to concentrate, calculate and remember.

The Poor IAQ Effect on Finances:

Ignoring poor indoor air quality can ultimately result in a suit for liability. Starting at the beginning, those absent asthmatic students are reducing funding, and the school is paying for substitute teachers and staff. Plant and equipment are operating at lower efficiency. "Locking the barn door" after an IAQ problem has surfaced will bring costs for consultants and remediation efforts. School may even have to be closed and students relocated until the problems have been resolved. The financial costs pile up.

Mold, mildew, and dust mites heighten allergic sensitivities 30 to 60 per cent. One out of five schools report indoor air quality problems, so there is a good chance your school has a problem unless you have been proactive in preventing poor IAQ. EPA asserts that it is less costly to prevent IAQ problems than it is to fix them. An EPA economic analysis of repairs performed at an elementary school showed that if \$370 per year over 22 years (a total of \$8,140) had been spent on preventive maintenance, \$1.5 million in repairs could have been avoided.

The Solution:

EPA's IAQ Tools for Schools (IAQ TFS) is a comprehensive kit which helps schools become proactive by identifying, correcting and preventing IAQ problems. The kit is provided at no cost and includes checklists, videos, sample memos and policies, a recommended management plan and a problem-solving tool.

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The Solution, cont'd.

Implementing the Tools for Schools program requires proactive support from upper management and the organization of a district wide IAQ team. This team should be made up of personnel who have an IAQ knowledge base, technical skills and will be involved in implementing the program. An IAQ Coordinator should be appointed for each building in the district. The kit provides training for the school IAQ Coordinators as well as the school staff.

Once the organization has been set up and the staff has been exposed to the purposes of the program, checklists are distributed which will help in the assessment of radon, lead and pest management programs in the school. School walkthroughs are conducted, using the checklists. EPA reports that in many schools these are conducted at least partially by PTA members of the team, reducing the load on staff.

Building findings are forwarded to the district IAQ team, which reviews each school's findings and prioritizes them into short-term and long-term IAQ improvement projects. Low cost solutions are implemented first. Higher cost solutions are funded through budget appropriations and/or grants.

At this point it is important to get back to the staff with the results of the study as well as short term and long term plans for solutions. This is also an opportunity to make sure that staff understands the importance of good IAQ and how behavior can influence IAQ in the school building. Placing books on registers, for instance, restricts air flow. Keeping unsecured food in the classroom attracts vermin and pests.

Some years ago, we replaced all of the leaky metal framed windows in a high school. Of course, the air intake on the registers had been closed for some time because of the rising cost of fuel. After a few months with the tight new windows and no fresh air circulation, the odor in the school rose so high that the building had to be shut down for a very thorough cleaning. An unbelievable amount of food and trash and animal droppings were recovered from behind registers, over ceiling panels, etc. Up until that time we had prided ourselves on how clean our schools were.

Health Related Benefits Reported to EPA:

- Decreased staff and student absences
- Increased comfort
- 25% decrease in visits to nurse's office with complaints of stomachaches and headaches
- 50% reduction in visits to the office for use of asthma inhalers

EPA's Suggested Good IAQ Policies:

- Implement integrated pest management practices
- Establish a "No Animals" in the classroom protocol
- Secure food in the classroom in air-tight containers
- Direct idling motor vehicles (e.g., buses) away from air intake vents
- Promote good IAQ painting practices – use low volatile organic compound paints and paint when the building is unoccupied
- Institute use of carpet manufacturer's cleaning recommendations.

To learn more about the IAQ TjS Kit, log on to the EPA's web site at www.epa.gov/iaq/schools, or order a kit by calling the IAQ INFO Hotline at (800) 438-4318.