Philly Healthy Schools Initiative

Environmental health risks in our schools

Schools are places where our kids go to learn, achieve, build lifelong friendships and grow up to be productive citizens in society. School buildings are also the place where our kids spend most of their waking hours.

Unfortunately, there's growing evidence that our school buildings are plagued with environmental health threats, from potential exposure to lead paint and lead in drinking water, to asbestos, to common asthma triggers like mold.

Numerous studies have shown that these threats don't only result in adverse health impacts to students and staff, but also compromise student learning and achievement, increase absenteeism and cause skyrocketing costs to already cash-strapped schools.

Consider:

- School officials believe that nearly 100% of the paint in school buildings constructed prior to 1978 remain lead-based paints, and lead levels in Philadelphia's children is double the national average;

- 15% of recent water samples taken from Philly public schools had lead levels higher than the federal standards for home tap water;

- Asbestos, a known carcinogen, is pervasive in schools' pipe and heating insulation, floor and ceiling tiles, and other products commonly found in our schools.

These conditions put the health of our kids, teachers, principals and maintenance workers at risk.

We need to protect our kids' health

All of our schools should be healthy and safe for our children, teachers, school workers and community members.

Yet incredibly, even the most basic standards to protect our kids and teachers from environmental health risks in school buildings are almost non-existent at the federal, state, local level.

This has got to change.

Recent Threats

While these threats are pervasive in our schools, recent examples show just how much is at risk:

In August 2017, thousands of square feet of mold growth were identified on carpets, desks, chairs, walls, ceilings and inside ventilation systems at Munoz-Marin Elementary School at 3rd & Ontario. At least $400 K was required for "emergency clean up" yet the root cause of the contamination was not addressed. Sadly, Munoz-Marin was not an isolated incident: many other school buildings have faced similar mold impact.

During the summer of 2017 asbestos removal and remediation was conducted at several schools including Spring Garden, Furness, and Bregy. Independent reviews found elevated levels of airborne asbestos fibers in multiple areas of the schools. Once uncovered, these elevated levels were addressed, but it's unclear what would have happened without an outside watchdog present.

For more information, contact David Masur:

✉ davidmasur@pennenvironment.org

📞 215-732-5897

We must do better:
The Healthy Schools Initiative

We created the Philly Healthy Schools Initiative to do just that: we've brought together parents, teachers and principals, students and community members, and public health experts from Philadelphia and around the country to develop a plan to address the environmental health threats found in our school buildings.

Our plan includes:

- **Improving the Public's Right to Know:** parents, teachers and community members must have access to environmental health data being collected by school district officials—but that's not shared with the public.

- **Establish "the ABCs" for buildings**: We must set "Adequate Building Conditions"—the minimally acceptable environmental health standards that should be met by all of our schools buildings.

- **Address the most critical environmental health threats in our schools**: and develop an action plan to remediate them in the fastest way possible.

- **Develop a "Master Plan" for our schools**: most large school districts across the country have a Facilities Master Plan to prioritize and ensure schools are healthy and safe, but the Philadelphia School district does not. We need to change this.

- **Create a Healthy Schools Task Force:** Parents, students, teachers, unions, and other community stakeholders must have a process to provide input and environmental health recommendations, and help develop the Facilities Master Plan.

- **Increase funding**: Our schools must be properly funded to finance these and other critical challenges facing our school buildings.

How you can help

Together, we are confident we can ensure our schools are safe and healthy places for our kids to learn, teachers to teach, and community members to enjoy.

Join the Philly Healthy Schools Initiative today to:

- Submit a Letter to the editor of your local newspaper in support of our efforts;

- Sign up your community group, business, place of worship or other organization to support our campaign;

- Write a letter, send an email or make a phone call to the school district or your local elected official in support of our campaign;

- Volunteer your time, energy or financial support.

Solutions are in use around the country

The recommendations of the Philly Healthy Schools Initiative are already being successfully used across the nation. Now it's time for the Philadelphia School District to implement these best practices including:

Educational Facility Task forces comprised of parents, teachers, principals and community members have been established in major cities across the U.S. including: Chicago, Washington DC, Seattle, Baltimore and others.

In Chicago, stakeholders developed rigorous facility performance standards to provide guidance and prioritize renovation, modernization and construction projects to protect health and create productive learning environments in their schools;

The Boston School District is developing a comprehensive 10-year Master Plan with input from stakeholders and its community-driven advisory committee.

Wyoming regularly assesses its public school facilities and provides detailed data to state officials in order to comply with state mandated requirements for educational equity and to bring all PK-12 schools up to a common set of condition and adequacy standards.