



Women, Children, and the Environment: What's Happening at Your School?

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School buildings are not usually the first place people think about when discussing concern for the environment, but perhaps they should. Why? Over 55 million children and seven million adults—20% of the U.S. population—are in schools every day.¹ Children and women of childbearing age are more vulnerable to the harmful effects of environmental contaminants. Nine of ten school occupants nationwide are women and children. Therefore, healthy indoor school environments are of particular importance.

Children need clean air outdoors, and they also need clean air indoors. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that half of all schools have indoor pollution problems that are largely avoidable. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) reported that polluted indoor environments are already damaging the nation's health and learning, and it has recommended taking action to prevent exposures to indoor contaminants.²

Schools simply have not been designed, built and operated to be environmentally responsible for those occupants most vulnerable to toxic hazards. Even new 'green' building standards too often miss the mark when it comes to indoor environmental health. But, fortunately, times are changing. For good reasons, both the EPA and the U.S. Department of Education are encouraging state agencies and local schools to take action to improve indoor air quality. It just makes sense: our children need healthy environments, it saves money to prevent pollution instead of remediating the consequences later at enormous costs, and improved indoor air quality is good for education. Healthy indoor environments have been shown to boost attendance and achievement and help with teacher recruitment, retention and productivity.³

Some schools have taken steps to improve the quality of their indoor environment by seeking out and buying less-hazardous products to use indoors; removing water-damaged carpets; installing hard surface flooring that is easier to clean; phasing in third-party certified green cleaning products to reduce or eliminate toxic chemicals; eliminating air fresheners and room deodorizers; disposing of old, outdated and hazardous chemicals to reduce the risks of spills and injuries; keeping food and pets out of classrooms to reduce pest infestations; and decluttering classrooms to make them easier to clean at the end of the day. Energy efficient lighting and ventilation systems are additional cost-effective strategies to improve indoor school environments.

On the thirteenth anniversary of **National Healthy Schools Day**, take the opportunity to think about your school. What steps are being taken to protect the health and wellbeing of the individuals and children who, during the school year, may spend eight or more hours there every day? What steps can you take to help? For more help, visit <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/index.html> or www.healthyschools.org.

¹ Healthy Schools Network, Inc. (2013). *Towards Healthy Schools 2015*. Albany, NY.

² IOM (Institute of Medicine). (2011). *Climate Change, the Indoor Environment, and Health*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

³ "About the Guidelines." EPA.
<http://www.epa.gov/schools/guidelinestools/ehguide/read/about.html#importance>.

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