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Improving your school's indoor air quality

By Kat Stoeffel

You may already know to make sure your child's school is vigilant about asbestos and lead paint, but indoor air pollution doesn't stop there. Chemicals with adverse health effects (at their mildest, irritating eyes and throats and, at their worst, linked to asthma, ADD, reproductive disorders, and cancer) float through schools and are inhaled by children. What's more, these chemicals have a much larger impact on kids' smaller bodies than on adults', says the EPA. Sounds scary, but there's good news: Unlike with outdoor air and water pollution, which are largely out of your control, there are plenty of ways to improve the indoor air quality at your school.

The Pollution: VOCs

Volatile organic compounds, known as VOCs, are gases that emit from liquids and solids like paints, solvents, and building materials. There are thousands of toxic VOCs, and some, like formaldehyde, are naturally-occurring. Certain VOCs have been linked with chronic health problems like liver damage and cancer. Health risks depend on the intensity and duration of exposure, but all VOCs have a much higher concentration indoors.

The Solution: Most harmful VOCs off gas into our indoor environments. Help your school choose healthier cleaning products and furnishings by directing school officials to Greenguard, a nonprofit organization committed to providing consumers with information about indoor air quality. Greenguard has an advisory board of chemical exposure experts, and they test and certify low-emitting products. The group's free online catalog of products, which have all earned the Greenguard stamp of approval, can help you make air-healthy purchases. The catalog includes almost everything you need to furnish a school or home—paints, cleaning products, furniture, electronics, building materials, carpets, and fabrics—plus information about where to buy them. What's more, Greenguard's certifications for products used in schools or around children are even stricter than their general safety requirements.

The Pollution: Mold

Mold is a natural and crucial part of the ecosystem—but once it gets indoors, it pollutes the air and can trigger problems in people with asthma, allergies, or weakened immune systems. Mold needs moisture to grow, so it's most commonly found near leaky plumbing or roofs, cracks in a foundation, heating and cooling systems, drain pans, and windows. Often, the first sign of mold is the musty odor of mold spores multiplying, says Cynthia Cangemi, a certified mold inspector for Horizon Environmental Services, an environmental consulting group in Austin, Texas.

The Solution: Preventing excess moisture in the first place is the first step to staying mold free, agree Horizon Environmental Services and the EPA, so school staff should be looking out for water stains, standing water, and building problems that would allow moisture to get inside. Further, indoor humidity levels should be maintained between 30 and 60 percent with the help of a dehumidifier. Equally important is containment of the infested area and disposal of moldy items, like books and carpets. Professional mold remediation contractors like Horizon Environmental Services also offer antimicrobial sprays, antifungal paints, industrial vacuums, and air scrubbers.

The Pollution: Radon

Radon is a radioactive gas that seeps into buildings from surrounding soil. Although radon is more prevalent in some parts of the country than others, it's recommended that all schools test for it, because long-term radon gas exposure is the second leading cause of lung cancer, after smoking. While all buildings are susceptible to radon pollution, only 20 percent of public schools currently test for it, according to the EPA.

The Solution: Make sure your school knows that unmitigated radon levels pose a serious threat to students and employs, but that testing for radon is easy and inexpensive. Contact your state radon office to help your school find a radon professional who can both test for radon and, if necessary, fix the problem. Regulation varies from state to state, but if your school repeatedly tests over 4 pCi/L (pico Curies per liter), the EPA recommends you take measures to protect your building's occupants from radon exposure. For example, Norman Johnson, a spokesperson for the National Environmental Health Association, installs active soil depressurization systems in schools, which use pipes to design a "path of least resistance" for the toxic gas, siphoning it from under the building and blowing it out into the atmosphere, above the building's roofline (which is safer than keeping radon indoors). If your school district plans on building, make sure they know to explore radon-resistant building techniques, like laying gravel and plastic sheeting underneath the foundation, or installing a passive radon control system.

The Pollution: Phthalates

Phthalates are industrial chemicals used to make flexible plastics like PVC and they are everywhere, including toys, vinyl flooring, wall coverings, and shower curtains. Phthalates don't bind to plastics, so they can off gas into the air. When inhaled or ingested, they can disrupt hormone balance, and several researchers and environmental groups believe phthalates are linked to male infertility and testicular cancer.

The Solution: The best way to avoid phthalate consumption is to read labels and ask questions. Think about the plastics your child is exposed to at school, investigate their chemical make-up, and educate other parents and administrators. Pencil erasers are a common phthalate culprit (and can be especially dangerous, since they tend to up in mouths), but lunch trays, chairs, and desk finishes should also be considered. If you have access to lists of ingredients, the common chemical acronyms for phthalates are: DHP, DBP, BBP, DEP, and DMP. Avoid plastics with the recycling labels 3 (which indicates PVC) and be wary of catch-all unknown ingredients like "fragrance."