

# 2004 School Environmental Checklist



As children go back to school, their health and safety is first in our minds. Schools are our children's "workplaces" where they spend more than six hours a day. To make sure they are not exposed to polluted indoor air, toxic chemicals, allergens and other hazards that can lead to health and learning problems such as increased hyperactivity, asthma, learning disabilities, and environmental sensitivities, walk through your school with this Checklist. Then use the Resources (page two, items link to each question) to develop a precautionary action plan to prevent or remediate problems.

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## Be Safe, Not Sorry, Take Precautions Now!

### 1. Is the school clean, and are carpets, floors, ceilings and air intakes free of water stains and mold?

**Tips:** Check for dirty areas; mold and water stains on walls, floors and ceilings. Damp areas that do not dry within 24 hours may grow mold.

### 2. Do classroom windows open, and are heating, air conditioning and ventilation systems in order?

**Tips:** Open and close classroom windows; ask teachers if heat and airflow are satisfactory. Check for air flow in or out of vents by holding a piece of paper or tissue in front of them.

### 3. Do trucks, buses and cars load or idle well away from the school?

**Tips:** Can you smell exhaust inside the building? Look for the loading and idling areas: they should be far away from outdoor air intakes and windows. Ask your principal if the school or state has a "No Idling" policy; if not, urge your district to adopt one.

### 4. Are renovations and repairs complete?

**Tips:** Are renovations and repairs-- including roof tarring, painting, demolition, construction-- complete? If not, ask the school administration to make public its plan to protect students and staff from dust, fumes, and noise.

### 5. Are cleaning products and science and art supplies free of toxic substances?

**Tips:** Some classroom supplies, like dry erase markers, glues, and cleaning products, may contain lead, mercury, asbestos, formaldehyde, or solvents. Ask to see Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS, included with purchase), for product health effects. Non-toxic replacements for supplies are often available; ask the school district to switch and to adopt a non-toxic purchasing policy.

### 6. Does the school control pests and unwanted plants (weeds) without the using pesticides?

**Tips:** Ask the facilities manager if pesticides are used and, if so, when, where and for what pests. Are students, staff and parents notified prior to pesticide applications? Ask to see the MSDS, included with each purchase, to learn about potential health effects if exposure occurs. Recommend the adoption of safer control strategies, such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

### 7. Are school grounds clean, and free of air, water and soil contamination and is wooden playground equipment made of non-arsenic treated wood?

**Tips:** Is school property clean and trash free? Are there are nearby sources of emissions, waste or heavy traffic that can contribute to soil, air and water pollution? To find out if the site was used for industrial wastes, research the property's past use. Arsenic (CCA)-treated wood on playgrounds can leach arsenic. If equipment is CCA-treated, have the soil tested and ask school to have the wood removed and disposed of properly.

### 8. Are steps taken to prevent food-borne illnesses and allergic reactions?

**Tips:** Look at the kitchen prep area: are floors and surfaces clean? Are refrigerators at or below 40 degrees, foods covered, and raw meat stored separately from other foods? Ask if there is a plan to prevent illnesses that includes educating staff on the serious risks food-borne illnesses pose to children and emergency notification of suspected outbreaks. Is there a plan for preventing and for handling serious allergic reactions?

### 9. Are drinking water and building paints lead free?

**Tips:** In May 2004, the EPA strongly recommended testing drinking water for lead contamination. Ask your principal if drinking water has been tested and to see the results. Paint dust in windowsills and soil around pre-1980 buildings is assumed to be lead-based.

### 10. Is the school accessible to all students and staff with asthma, environmental, learning, developmental and physical disabilities?

**Tips:** Federal laws require schools to have accessible programs and facilities and to offer free appropriate educational services. School environmental conditions that worsen asthma, like polluted indoor air, can lower test scores and increase absenteeism. They also cause students and staff to drop out. Ask about your school's absenteeism rate and compare to other schools.

If you answered YES to all of these questions, **thank your school** at the next board meeting and send a letter to the local paper! If you have NO's, pick an issue to start work on, use the resource list, and develop a precautionary action plan.