

Schools must make indoor air safe for students

By Daniela Kunz 11:16 p.m. CDT March 26, 2014



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Nine of 10 school occupants nationwide are women and children. In fact, more than 55 million children and 7 million adults, or 20 percent of the U.S. population, are in schools every day. Classrooms are more densely occupied than offices, and many U.S. schools are in a dire state.

The Institute of Medicine reports that polluted indoor environments are already damaging the nation's health and learning, and recommends preventing exposures to health-harming substances indoors. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimated that half of schools have indoor pollution problems that are

largely avoidable.

Our schools have not been designed, built and operated to be environmentally responsible to the most vulnerable occupants — our children and women of childbearing age. Fortunately, times are changing: Many governmental and nongovernmental, medical and health organizations and the U.S. Department of Education are encouraging state agencies and local schools to take action for good reasons:

First, it makes sense. Children need healthy learning environments. Second, it saves money in the long run to prevent pollution, instead of remedying it later at enormous costs. Third, it's good for education: Healthy indoor environments boost attendance and achievement, and help with teacher recruitment, retention and productivity. They also keep health care costs down.

Indoor actions by schools across the country include: hard surface flooring for easier cleaning; removing water-damaged carpeting; phasing in certified green cleaning products and applying them responsibly, away from students; eliminating air fresheners/room deodorizers; disposing of outdated hazardous chemicals to reduce the risk of spills and injuries; keeping food and pets out of classrooms to reduce pest infestations; decluttering a classroom for easier cleaning at the end of the day; and scheduling indoor air-polluting maintenance work, even if the products have a "Green Seal" of approval or are labeled "Low VOC," for when it will not affect occupants, to further protect them from unnecessary and avoidable exposures to damaging substances.

Advanced energy efficient lighting and ventilating systems will add an even more positive impact in schools and bring long-term savings.

On April 8, the 12th anniversary of National Healthy Schools Day sponsored by Healthy Schools Network, we will thank some Tennessee schools for the work they are doing to provide healthier, greener places for children and teachers, and for scheduling projects that would trigger indoor air pollutants for when they will not affect occupants in schools.

We urge all school districts to encourage schools in Tennessee to take part at this national event for Healthy Schools Day the week of April 8 and to focus on the health and well-being of the students and teachers as they make decisions on cleaning, maintenance, repair and construction of new buildings for the coming year. Also, to use and implement free online guidelines from various health organizations such as the American Lung Association, the American Pediatrics Association, the National Institute of Medicine and others for safer indoor air quality in schools.

Daniela Kunz is the founder and president of Parents For Students Safety in Franklin.

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