

Back To School Environmental Checklist



As we start preparing our children for the new school year, their health and safety is paramount in our minds. Schools are our children's workplaces where they spend six or more hours a day. To ensure that they are not exposed to polluted indoor air, toxic chemicals, allergens and other hazards that may lead to health and learning problems, such as increased hyperactivity, asthma, learning disabilities, and chemical sensitivity, walk through your school with this Environmental Checklist. Then use the resources on page two (which correspond to each question) to develop a precautionary action plan to prevent or remediate problems.

Be Safe, Not Sorry, Take Precautions Now!

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

Tips: Check for unclean areas and 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, and ask teachers if heat and airflow are satisfactory. Check for air flow in or out of vents by holding a piece of 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 district or state has a "No Idling" policy, if not, urge your district to adopt one.

4. Are renovations and repairs completed?

Tips: Are renovations and repairs, including roof tarring, painting, demolition and construction completed? If not, ask school administration to publicly share their plan to control dust, fumes and noise.

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

Tips: Some classroom supplies, such as dry erase markers, glues and cleaning products, 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 available. Ask the school district to adopt a non-toxic purchasing policy if there is not one.

6. Does the school control pests and unwanted weeds without the use of 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 pesticide purchase, to learn about potential health effects if exposure occurs. Recommend the adoption of safer 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: Are there trash receptacles outside of the building? See if there are neighboring sources of emissions, waste or heavy traffic, which contribute to soil, air and water pollution. To determine if the site was used for any industrial waste disposal, research the property's past use, and have the soil tested for arsenic contamination, which can come from arsenic treated (CCA) wood used in playgrounds. If equipment is made of CCA wood, ask the school to have it removed and disposed of properly.

8. Are steps taken to prevent food-borne illnesses?

Tips: Observe 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 the school administration if they have a plan to prevent illnesses that includes educating food handlers on the serious risks food-borne illnesses poses to children, and emergency notification in the case of suspected outbreak.

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 or flakes found in windowsills, carpets, stairwells and soil from pre-1980 buildings are assumed to be lead-based. Lead poisoning has been proven to cause a variety of serious health problems, including mental retardation and aggressive behaviors, and has been linked to schizophrenia.

10. Is the school fully 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 offer appropriate educational services. School conditions that exacerbate asthma, such as poor indoor air quality, inhibit teacher and student performance, and may hinder their ability to attend school. Ask about your school's absenteeism rate compared to other schools.

If you answered "Yes" to all of these questions, thank your school board at the next board meeting, and send a letter to the local paper! If one or more resulted in a "No," choose one or two issues to work on initially, use the resources provided, and develop a precautionary action plan.