



Coalition *for* Healthier Schools

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Coordinated by Healthy Schools Network

Contact for letter: Claire L. Barnett, Executive Director, Healthy Schools Network

May 15, 2024 - via email to int@appro.senate.gov, FY25 Int OWT, for US EPA- updated sign ons post 5/15

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment & Related Agencies
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment & Related Agencies
531 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Merkley and Ranking Member Murkowski:

Children are not just little adults, and schools are not just little offices.

We, the undersigned **forty-nine** education, health, environment, and children's health groups from coast to coast, urge the Committee to include \$100 million for the US Environmental Protection Agency Office of Air and Radiation/Indoor Environments Division (EPA/OAR/IED) to protect school children and personnel from unhealthy environments in schools and childcare facilities and to help improve the environmental conditions of our nation's schools.

Indoor air quality (IAQ) has been ignored for over 30 years (US GAO 1995, US GAO 2020), eroding children's health, thinking, and learning. EPA/OAR/IED needs \$100 million to lead a national educational campaign, with expanded national and regional education and training grants, including \$50M for state grants, and for direct technical assistance to schools. EPA must also update or prepare guidance to enhance school indoor environments which will deteriorate in warmer, wetter outdoor conditions, and for site resiliency and adaptation that will help schools stay open or reopen quickly after severe disasters.

Since it takes months if not years to rebuild a storm-damaged school, schools clearly need to be more resilient to extreme weather and or to reopen safely and quickly after disasters. EPA should also issue new guidance to states and schools' communities on how to assess and remediate storm damages, including risks from legacy toxics exposed by structural damages (lead, asbestos, PCBs, pesticides, lab, leaning chemicals, vehicle maintenance chemicals).

Indoor air pollution is a serious threat that is hard to address: there are multiple potential sources to consider. Other EPA pollutants, such as lead in drinking water, PCBs, asbestos, or hazardous waste, are simpler to identify. Air pollutants can come from poor construction and siting near hazardous facilities; leaky roofs and growing molds; chemical spills and odors from science labs; kitchen, locker room, lavatory stench; carbon dioxide accumulations; lack of incoming fresh air; carbon monoxide leaks; cleaning and disinfecting products; and pests and pesticides, or from

occupants themselves and the processes and products used in classes. It is complicated, which is why high-turnover school leaders and boards of education, as well as personnel and communities, need long-term sustained education, guidance, and support.

Why school environments and impacts on children are urgent issues. Education is a social determinant of health. During a school year, about fifty-five million children in the US spend the majority of their waking hours when not at home in schools. Numerous studies have documented that school conditions such as polluted IAQ, mold, dust and debris, high heat, poor siting, proximity to hazards, noise, and poor lighting and sanitation, damage children's "health, thinking, and learning" (Harvard SPH 2017; NRC 2006). Today, 40% of school-aged children have at least one existing chronic health condition (CDC), including asthma, which affects 1 in 13 school-aged children and remains the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. When we as a nation put health-compromised children in polluted buildings every day, we cannot expect the next generation to be as healthy or competitive as we are today.

Schools as critical infrastructure for children. Schools are not climate-ready – which means more frequent long-term school closures, and not epidemic-ready, again suggesting more frustrating closures and hybrid learning schemes. Schools are in fact critical infrastructure for children, families, and communities. Indeed, attendance is mandatory in all states, and 98% of US children are in school every day.

- Schools are more densely occupied than nursing homes and less well maintained
- 95% of school occupants are women and children
- Nearly half of all public school students are children and youth of color.
- The poorest communities hardest hit by COVID and climate change are also the communities where children's health and learning are impacted by the worst conditions.
- An estimated 50 percent of public schools have outdated heating and ventilation systems, and thousands of schools likely contain PCBs and asbestos, as well as old, outdated chemical products.
- The nation's public schools today contain over 8 billion square feet of learning space valued at over \$3 trillion, which means more frequent long-term school closures ahead if they are not physically resilient. Investments in electric buses and energy retrofits are appreciated and welcome but will not guarantee that a facility will survive the next super-storm intact.

This is the Senate moment to act. Put the EPA's existing authorizations and 30 years of expertise on indoor air/ environmental quality to work to improve school buildings and grounds, and thus health and learning outcomes for children, especially for those most disadvantaged, including children with disabilities.

We appreciate the funding for school infrastructure through the various COVID programs, ARPA, BIL, and IRA, however EPA gets a scant \$50 million over 10 years from IRA to address indoor air. While the Department of Energy (DOE), Department of Education (ED), and CDC have far larger programs, none match EPA's knowledge and experience on the physical environment of schools and its impact on children: neither ED nor CDC has an authorization or in-house expertise on school facilities. To date, EPA's level of funding is embarrassingly small, considering the

documented environmental problems in schools, and the lack of knowledge in communities and among education leaders on how to address those issues effectively.

Of the \$100 million annual funding that we recommend for EPA's indoor air program to improve school indoor air and related issues, we urge that half be awarded to states, and the balance through cooperative agreements and regional grants to tribes, cities, universities, and nongovernmental organizations to provide "hands-on" technical assistance and education to k-12 constituencies and NGOs. EPA regional offices should also have at least one expert in school Indoor Environments. EPA's authorizations and guidance for states, drawn from existing state policies, has been enriched with inputs from multiple state users. Local and state-level agencies can be helpful partners with EPA in addressing key issues of low-income schools and rural-remote schools.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

AFT Connecticut
Airthings, GA
Alaska Community Action on Toxics
American Lung Association
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
BrainWorks, GA
Cedar Creek Elementary School, TX
Children's Environmental Health Network
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
Climate Families NYC
Coalition for Healthier Schools
Comunidades Sin Fronteras CSF-CT INC, CT
Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs
Cool Green Schools, MD
Environmental Working Group
First Focus on Children
Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition, NY
Healthy Schools Network
Healthy Schools Now, WEC, NJ
Informed Green Solutions, VT
International WELL Building Institute
Learning Disabilities Association of America
MADE SAFE, NY
MD Children's Environmental Health Coalition (MD CEHC)
Mothers Out Front, MA
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of School Nurses
National Center for Healthy Housing
New Jersey Association of Designated Persons
NYS Parent Teacher Association
Protect Education, OH
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK), VA
Pure Air Solutions of PA

Responsible Purchasing Network
Society for Public Health Education
Society of State Leaders of Health and Physical Education
Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services
The Autistic People of Color Fund, NE
Vermont Public Interest Research Group
WellAir, CT
Wing's Testing & Balancing Co., Inc., CT
Women for a Healthy Environment, PA
Women's Voices for the Earth, MT

Updated NGO sign-ons received after May 15)

21st Century Schools Fund
American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees
Autistic Self-Advocacy Network
Center for Cities and Schools/UC Berkeley
West Harlem Environmental Action
Healthy Schools Caucus