

School Policy Framework

Updated: October 14, 2012

Asthma is a major problem for school-aged children. One in every six children in California has been diagnosed with asthma. It is a leading cause of school absences due to chronic disease, costing children their education and schools resources in lost attendance-based funding. All too often, students and school staff are confronted with unhealthy air quality on campus that can trigger or exacerbate their asthma. Alarming, a California Air Resources Board study found significant indoor air quality issues in the state's portable and traditional classrooms¹ caused by a variety of sources, including: malfunctioning or under maintained ventilation systems; air pollutants from nearby freeways and railyards; asthma triggers like dust, mold, and pests; and chemical fumes and residues from cleaning products, pesticides, furnishings, and building materials. Importantly, studies have demonstrated that improved indoor air quality in school facilities has a positive impact on student achievement and staff well-being. Clearly, leadership in addressing school health problems is needed.

The fiscal challenges facing today's schools makes creating healthier school environments even more pressing as school districts attempt to use resources as efficiently as possible to increase academic achievement. This endeavor starts by recognizing that every child and school employee has the right to a safe, clean school environment and that unhealthy environments are not conducive to learning and teaching. Schools around the country have successfully taken steps to help students and staff with asthma be more successful. For example, districts have switched to certified green cleaning products², prohibited bus and vehicle idling on or near school grounds, implemented integrated pest management practices, and creatively retained school nurses by billing health plans for some nursing services. Especially in today's fiscal environment, creating healthy schools requires strong leadership with commitment, flexibility, and resourcefulness from a variety of school stakeholders. Most importantly, education and health advocates can demonstrate their leadership by working together to create State policies that encourage the creation of healthy schools so that students can achieve and teachers can teach without being distracted or debilitated by health conditions like asthma.

Below are a variety of approaches (though not exhaustive) that the state could enact to create a healthy school environment. Many of these coincide with the school-related goals in California's State Strategic Plan on Asthma, which was released by the California Department of Public Health in the spring of 2008³.

¹ <http://www.arb.ca.gov/research/indoor/pes/pes.htm>

² <http://www.rampasthma.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Breathing-Easier-Report.pdf>

³ <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/caphi/Documents/AsthmaStrategicPlan.5-5-08.pdf>

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Ensure resources for school facility maintenance and repair

The first line of defense in preserving a healthy school is proper maintenance and repair. Without adequate funding, even schools with the best policies and most skilled staff will fall short of their health goals. When resources are cut from maintenance budgets, there are fewer facilities and custodial staff on hand to maintain and repair school infrastructure. Fewer custodial staff, for example, means that classrooms are more likely to accumulate dust and water intrusions are more likely to lead to mold -- both known asthma triggers.

The State can:

- Return the minimum funding school districts must set aside for facilities and maintenance from 1% to 3% of a district's general fund budget.
- Maintain or increase state funding for the Deferred Maintenance⁴ and Facilities Hardship Programs⁵.
- Reduce the volatility of school funding so that local leaders do not have to choose between retaining teachers and maintaining a healthy school when budgets are reduced.

Require schools to implement Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) maintenance and prevention practices

The best policies for creating asthma-friendly schools are proactive and prevent unhealthy conditions from taking root. One of the most comprehensive models is the U.S. EPA's Tools for Schools program, which provides guidance for schools to identify, correct, and prevent IAQ problems, including simple, low cost options⁶. The California Teachers Association's Healthy Air, Healthy Kids program has similar resources⁷.

The State can:

- Mandate, incentivize, and/or facilitate the adoption of comprehensive school-specific IAQ management plans, as Minnesota has modeled⁸. For example, the state could require an IAQ component in a school/district's five year maintenance plan.
- Require targeted approaches such as the use of asthma-friendly products (Environmentally Preferable Products) for cleaning and teaching and the implementation of integrated pest management.
- Establish and enforce IAQ standards that ensure healthy indoor air environments in schools. Currently, such protections for students and staff do not exist.
- Provide schools with resources and assessment tools, such as the Facilities Inspection Toolkit (F.I.T) to adequately monitor school health conditions⁹.

⁴ <http://www.dgs.ca.gov/opsc/Programs/deferredmaintenanceprogram.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.dgs.ca.gov/opsc/Programs/facilityhardshipprogram.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/>

⁷ <http://www.teachersforhealthykids.com/materials/healthy-air-healthy-kids/>

⁸ <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/indoorair/schools/plan/index.html>

⁹ <http://www.cashnet.org/resource-material/FITGuidebook.pdf>

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Address the issue of dampness and mold

Mold is an all too common asthma trigger caused by the very preventable build-up of moisture on surfaces. No safe levels or types of mold have been established, so rapidly addressing water and mold problems is extremely important. In addition to ensuring mold and water issues are covered in IAQ maintenance plans (see above), additional safeguards could significantly reduce mold exposure at schools.

The State can:

- Provide training and resources for maintenance staff to learn how to properly deal with water and mold problems effectively.
- Help schools navigate a mold remediation process by establishing minimum standards and licensing for mold inspectors and remediators as states such as Texas have done¹⁰. Currently, California only provides guidance on hiring mold inspectors¹¹.
- Establish and enforce mold standards for schools. Currently, there are not any mold standards in California. However, the California Department of Public Health's recently released new findings on the health impacts of dampness and mold¹² suggest a need to establish health protective standards in schools. A straightforward solution is modeled in San Francisco's housing code where the simple presence of mold requires remediation¹³.

Promote the healthy renovation and construction of school facilities

Much can be accomplished in indoor air quality through proper design and materials in school construction, modernization, and renovation. All too often the building materials used for many of our schools have been found to contribute to unhealthy indoor environments.

The State can:

- Require or incentivize that all new schools use the best available green building, design, and maintenance practices that maximize IAQ for all new construction and renovation during and after construction. Making healthy school design features eligible for state school construction and modernization funds, an accomplishment from Senate Bill 128 (passed in 2011), is a great step forward¹⁴.
- Increase the allocation of school construction and modernization bond money to the High Performing Schools Program¹⁵.

¹⁰ <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/mold/default.shtm>

¹¹ <http://www.cal-iaq.org/separator/mold-and-dampness/mold-questions>

¹² <http://www.cal-iaq.org/download-mold-publications/mold-publications/statement-on-building-dampness-mold-and-health>

¹³ http://www.nchh.org/Portals/0/Contents/HH_Codes_CA_San_Francisco_10-6-08.pdf

¹⁴ http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/11-12/bill/sen/sb_0101-0150/sb_128_bill_20111008_chaptered.pdf

¹⁵ <http://chps.net/>

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Reduce exposure to unhealthy Outdoor Air Quality (OAQ)

While a great deal of attention and energy should rightfully be spent on improving schools' indoor environments, the impact of outdoor environments should also be considered. Children are particularly susceptible to pollutants like diesel particulate and smog, which can cause serious respiratory issues and aggravate asthma.

The State can:

- Actively enforce vehicle idling laws (particularly those pertaining to school buses) as well as help schools develop processes for filing complaints.
- Require schools to notify staff and students of poor air quality days and restrict outdoor activities. Several local asthma coalitions have implemented an Air Quality Flag Program with their local school districts as an innovative notification system¹⁶. In partnership with the local air district, this program has been expanded to provide schools with real time updates on air quality throughout the day in the Central Valley¹⁷.
- Establish clear buffer zones between schools and pollution sources, such as, freeways, high traffic corridors, railyards, polluted land or agricultural land with active pesticide use. The CA Air Resources Board's land use guidebook¹⁸ and the US EPA's school siting guidelines¹⁹ serve as excellent resources.
- Maintain or increase funding to clean bus fleets through the purchase of new, cleaner vehicles or retrofitting existing buses in order to meet new state and federal emissions standards.

Support asthma and chronic disease management plans

Finally, while much can be done to make school environments healthier, more needs to happen to support and protect those students that come to school with a variety of chronic conditions such as asthma.

The State can:

- Increase funding for school nurses in California's schools to ensure care is available, even during challenging economic times.
- Create and disseminate a model comprehensive school health plan that includes an asthma component and/or a district-wide asthma action plan that schools/districts can put in place even without the ideal levels of medical staff.
- Provide support for teacher and staff training, school asthma plans, and parent education to ensure children with asthma get the care and attention they need, especially where school nurses are missing.
- Encourage the use of curriculum that incorporates asthma awareness and understanding. The National Heart Lung and Blood Institute has developed a curriculum for elementary school²⁰.

¹⁶ <http://www.valleyair.org/van/2009/Feb%20VAN%2009.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.valleyair.org/programs/raan/documents/RAAN%20Orientation%20Document%209-15-10.pdf>

¹⁸ <http://www.arb.ca.gov/ch/handbook.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://www.epa.gov/schools/siting/>

²⁰ <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/prof/lung/asthma/school/index.htm>