Kids spend a lot of time in school. Which means they spend a lot of time breathing the air inside school facilities.

When school air quality is unhealthy, learners suffer. Research shows that poor indoor air quality in schools is linked to decreased concentration and poor test results. Keeping school air clean helps our children learn better and perform at their full potential.

Poor school air quality can also contribute to asthma attacks, headaches, fatigue, nausea, and rashes. It can exacerbate learning and behavioral disorders. And it can increase absenteeism.

The EPA estimates that up to half of all the nation’s schools have problems with indoor environmental quality. Factors affecting school air include:

• Proximity to heavily trafficked roads and idling diesel engines, such as school buses and delivery trucks
• Proximity to industrial facilities like bus depots, chemical facilities, and incinerators
• Chemicals in cleaning products
• Pesticides used in and around the school
• Toxic chemicals used in building materials, furnishings, art supplies, science materials, and other school supplies
• Mold infestation
• Asbestos and radon

Some of these factors result from aging infrastructure and inadequate maintenance of facilities; others can be found even in brand new buildings.

Some of these contributors to poor air quality are difficult and costly to fix. But some we can take care of right away. Parents can demand no-idling rules. Parents can demand that safer products be used around children.
Schools that switch to green cleaning products have reaped financial and health benefits. Eleven states have adopted policies promoting or requiring green cleaning in schools, and schools around the country are seeing the benefits.

Certified green cleaning products screened by an independent third party are cost-neutral or cost saving, not to mention effective — with reported savings up to 30% over conventional cleaning programs.

Add that to reduced asthma attacks and absences, and you’ve got a green, lean, school-cleaning machine.

Thinking about other ways your school can keep kids healthy? Our friends at Healthy Schools Network offer these simple tips. Most are commonsense solutions with minimal cost.

- Check for molds and mildew
- Report and fix leaks promptly
- Use micro-fiber cloths and mops to clean surfaces
- Use high-efficiency vacuum bags to control dust
- Remove classroom clutter
- Use walk-off floor mats at all entrances to trap dirt
- Clean air supply vents regularly
- Keep air flow pathways clear (remove plants, books, papers, projects from vents; windows should open)
- Use local exhaust fans for water-intensive areas (lavatories, kitchens, gyms) and pollution-generating areas (art, biology labs, computer and copier rooms, voc-ed classrooms)
- Inventory and dispose of outdated hazardous chemicals
- Use low-emission products, equipment, interior finishes and furnishings
- Ban air fresheners and room deodorizers
- Screen and caulk building cracks and crevices to prevent pests
- Identify pest problems first; if simple natural controls don’t work, use baits and traps or spot pesticide treatments

Find out what’s happening in your child’s school. Check out the conditions of the facility, the ventilation system, the cleaning chemicals used, and the pest control strategies. Ask questions, take notes, and talk to other parents. Contact us for resources about how to work with your school.

Harness the power of the PTA. Ask your PTA to help clean up your school. Support state efforts to promote or require green cleaning in schools and other public buildings.

Get involved in the movement to reform our federal chemical policy. Our current system allows chemicals to be sold without adequate safety testing, and parents have no way of finding out which chemicals are in products. Safety testing and ingredient disclosure will help make all cleaning products safe for cleaning staff and children. Visit saferchemicals.org for more information.

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