



Why Every Day Should be National Healthy Schools Day

April 2, 2019

The needs of our public education system are great. Recent multi-day teacher strikes nationwide from Los Angeles and Oakland in California to West Virginia closed our nation's schools as districts demanded resources to promote student health and well-being, including smaller class sizes and more school nurses and counselors. A major blind spot in the national discourse about improving our education system is the physical and environmental state of school facilities and how it can impact student health and school performance.

As health professionals, researchers, parents, teachers, advocates, and students who are dedicated to protecting children's environmental health, this [National Healthy Schools Day](#) is a reminder that unsafe learning environments persist and require urgent attention to ensure healthy, productive and thriving k-12 students.

Despite compulsory laws that require student attendance in the U.S., there is no federal agency or accountability body to oversee the environmental safety of schools for the 55 million children who spend more than 15,000 hours each year in these settings. The [2017 School Infrastructure Report Card](#), which evaluates the capacity and quality of our facilities, gave our schools a D+, suggesting over half of our schools need to be improved to reach a "good" condition, due to a wide range of issues including poor plumbing and HVAC systems. The condition of school infrastructure and facilities, including how they are maintained, affects the indoor air quality, drinking water quality, temperature regulation, and other factors that influence, and in some cases have lasting harmful [impacts](#) on, student health and academic performance. For students in under-resourced communities, a poor school environment exacerbates inequalities and health disparities and contributes to performance gaps.

Consider lead.

Decades of scientific evidence point to the adverse impacts of even low levels of lead exposure on children--including IQ deficits, increased behavior problems, and diminished classroom performance. Lead hazards, especially in settings where children spend considerable amounts of time, should have been eliminated by now. Yet the legacy of its contamination persists. Nearly 30 years after the Lead and Copper Rule was enacted by the EPA, schools across the country continue to shut off their drinking fountains due to lead-contamination of the water (e.g. [Detroit](#), [Boise](#), [Seattle](#)). In addition, many school structures predate the 1978 ban on lead-based paint, and poor maintenance results in [student exposures](#) through the flaking paint and its dust. Thus, more than one in three students in the U.S. is exposed to [elevated lead levels](#). This is unacceptable considering children's brains are meant to be nurtured, not harmed, in schools. [Teachers in Newark agree](#) and are suing the city to address schools' lead problems. We shouldn't have to sue or to wait until children are harmed, in order to protect children's health.

Currently, there are two pending opportunities to improve our schools. The House and Senate introduced Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA 2019) would invest \$100 billion in school infrastructure over 10 years, and the proposed fiscal year 2020 budget for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would establish a \$50 million grant healthy schools program to help states and communities identify and resolve school environmental health hazards. Both initiatives are a step in the right direction, although we need more information on how the EPA program will operate and ensure funding is not taken from other critical EPA programs.

Support is needed for RASA 2019 to become law and to ensure its appropriate implementation, and EPA's grant program, depending on how it is administered, could provide needed facility upgrades to schools serving the most vulnerable students.

We must tell our elected officials that their support of RASA 2019 and of a fully funded EPA is critical to our children's health and performance.

Our nation's schools are the front lines of creating a healthy nation and ensuring economic progress. We can provide a holistic solution that ensures healthy, high performing students, in every zip code. We just need the political will.

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