

41

Create Safe, Green Schools

Most people are shocked to learn that indoor air is often far more polluted than just about anyplace outside. And it's not just our homes, schools and workplaces. It's practically *all* interiors — even cars. (Yes, our cherished vehicles are highly toxic, especially when they're fresh off the dealer's lot. Bumper-to-bumper traffic also cranks up toxicity inside vehicles.)

Since children are more vulnerable to toxic substances than adults, it is unacceptable that a great number of school buildings in Canada and the US flunk the health test. The Coalition for Healthier Schools says a significant number of public school buildings in America are notoriously unhealthy: "Polluted indoor air, toxic

For too long, policy-makers have retrospectively pleaded, "If only we had known earlier what we know now."

— Dr. Roberto Bertollini,
World Health Organization

chemical and pesticide use, growing molds, lead in paint and drinking water, and asbestos are factors that impact the health of our nation's students and school staff." Indoor problems are worse if schools are sited near polluting industries or on abandoned landfills and toxic waste dumps.¹ Think Love Canal, in Niagara Falls, New York, where the school was built right on top of a chemical waste disposal site.

Until recently, the majority of buildings focused solely on energy savings, which made sick buildings even sicker. Airtight construction stopped most indoor pollutants from escaping.

Grades are improving for many public education facilities. Today's high-performance schools are no longer prone to sick building syndrome, and they do address a wide range of environment and health issues.

A high performance school is healthy; thermally, visually and acoustically comfortable; energy, materials and water efficient; safe and secure; easy to maintain and operate; has an environmentally responsive site; is a building that teaches; a community resource; is stimulating architecturally; and is adaptable to changing needs.²

Healthy means as non-toxic as possible; it means reducing or eliminating hazardous chemicals such as pesticides, industrial cleaners containing carcinogens, exhaust from idling vehicles, radon gas leaks, asbestos insulation and playground equipment made from arsenic-treated wood.

- Building Green Schools: www.nesea.org/buildings/greenschoolsresources.html
- Chicago Center for Green Technology: www.ci.chi.il.us/Environment/GreenTech
- Citizens for a Safe Learning Environment, Halifax: www.chebucto.ns.ca/education/CASLE/casle.html
- Evergreen: www.evergreen.ca
- Green Buildings: www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/buildings/gbintro.shtml
- Healthy Schools Network: www.healthyschools.org
- Indoor Air Quality Toolkit: www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/toolkit.html
- LEED: www.usgbc.org & www.cagbc.org
- www.onlineethics.org/environment/lcanal/
- Portland's Green Building Resource: www.green-rated.org

Toronto's Real Food for Real Kids' goal is to ensure that children in daycares and schools are fed healthy, organic sustainably produced food at snack and lunchtime. RFRK has won several City of Toronto 2006 Awards of Excellence for its contribution to healthy food for children.

The Coalition for Healthier Schools urges municipalities and school board officials to act boldly to make their schools healthier:

- Adopt and support the use of best environmental practices, including training for school officials and staff for pest control, and the selection of least-toxic materials and cleaning products.
- Adopt the US EPA's IAQ Tools for Schools and Design Tools for Schools to improve indoor air quality and to design healthy, productive learning environments.
- Adopt an integrated pest management program to reduce or eliminate the use of toxic pesticides.
- Provide parents and employees with right to know information about chemicals and environmental hazards at school.³

Schoolyards also need attention, given the long history of pesticide use and playground areas chock-full of pressure-treated wooden equipment. In 2001 the Toronto District School Board and Evergreen launched a School Ground Greening Initiative to provide schools with the support to create and sustain healthy, diverse, naturalized school grounds.⁴ The project runs interactive, hands-on workshops and offers professional design consultations to help school grounds go green.

Most cities have some carrots and sticks they can use to provoke toxic schools to get fixed, but impoverished municipalities and boards of education simply can't go it alone. Jonathan Kozol's 2005 book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration*



of Apartheid Schooling in America, described continuing and often worsening segregation in US public schools, where the environmental conditions are as abysmal as the educational standards. In countries as wealthy as the United States and Canada, higher levels of government must ensure that indeed no child is left behind, or sickened by shabby, unhealthy schools.

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System standard has become a benchmark for excellence for green building that many school boards are adopting. Studies show that students taught in classrooms that are lit by sunlight or full-spectrum lighting are healthier, happier, have higher attendance rates and perform better on tests. In New Jersey, the Governor wants the more than 400 new or substantially renovated schools to incorporate the LEED guidelines.

It's not just schools, either. Municipal public building sites such as the Chicago Center for Green Technology and the City of White Rock's Operations Building, near Vancouver, BC, have achieved the highest LEED standards. Some municipalities such as Chicago and Portland offer tax incentives for businesses to build LEED certified structures.