

## MTA Environmental Health and Safety Module: Overview

This module presents an overview on environmental health and safety (EHS) issues; offers tips for Health and Safety Committees and school staff on what they can do to identify and address EHS problems and provides additional resources and information.

Information in each module can be presented in a 10-minute union meeting. On the back of each module are *Quick Facts and Action Steps* that the Building Rep can present at a school faculty meeting in 3 minutes. Building Reps can use the resources provided in each module to supply additional information and strategic advice.

**Module Topics:** Overview of EHS, Mold, Ventilation, Pests and Integrated Pest Management, Pets, Plants and Food, Hazards in Your Classroom, Chemical Hazards, MTA Health and Safety Website, Construction and Renovation, Healthy High Performance School Design, Symptom Surveys

Environmental Safety and Health (EHS) includes everything from indoor air quality and ventilation to specific hazards such as: asbestos and toxic school chemicals; sources of outdoor pollution such as diesel exhaust; water, air, or soil contamination. Designing new “green” schools” that are environmentally “friendly” and promote health is becoming a popular approach to improving air quality in our schools. The good news is that the new Mass School Building Authority is considering adoption of green school design standards which will be part of the reimbursement formula from the State in the future.

Indoor air pollution can be harmful to our health. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) studies of human exposure to air pollutants indicate that indoor levels may be 2-5 times and sometimes 100 times higher than outdoor levels. And, it is estimated that most people spend up to 90% of their time indoors. Children are particularly vulnerable to pollution. Nearly one in 13 school-aged children has asthma. Teachers and other school staff were among the top three industry sector groups for work-related asthma reported to Mass Dept. of Public Health. EHS problems can cause other health effects too such as: headaches, sinus and respiratory problems, tightness of chest, hoarseness, eye, nose, throat irritation, rashes, allergies, chemical sensitivities. Many teachers are also concerned about the high rates of cancer among their co-workers.

Failure to prevent or solve EHS problems can have many consequences. It can impact student behavior and learning; reduce teacher performance, accelerate deterioration of building systems, cause emergency school closures and present liability problems.

Sometimes air quality problems are not easily diagnosed which is why it’s important to have policies and procedures for EHS that are preventative and are communicated to everyone. The *EPA Tools for Schools Indoor Air Quality Kit* is a nationally recognized model for addressing EHS issues. Massachusetts State and Federal agencies have developed an extensive checklist to guide school districts in requirements and best practices for school EHS. The MTA offers its own tips for getting started through the EHS modules. You may use them to raise awareness or as part of your Health and Safety Committee’s action plan. Many of the resources provided by the EPA and other State and Federal Agencies are included in the resource sections of each module.

## **Tips for addressing EHS problems:**

- Organize a meeting about environmental health and safety conditions in your school or school district.
- Decide what model your Local Association will use to handle EHS issues. Examples: Health and Safety Committee (school-based, union only), Association Rep as the EHS contact
- Find out teachers' concerns and identify what information people need.
- Document the history of the problems – previous inspections, reports, repairs.
- Reach all of your members – use the MTA IAQ on line survey, which is available on request, to gather information about problems or use the EHS module, *Classroom Environmental Checklist*.
- Go to the MTA web site at: [www.massteacher.org/ehs](http://www.massteacher.org/ehs) and click on Contact and Feedback. You can then communicate with your MTA Environmental Health and Safety Committee regarding your concerns.
- Use the MTA EHS modules to introduce key issues and monitor the action steps proposed.
- Build support with allies – parents, community, MassCOSH.

## **Quick Facts and Action Steps (3-minute meeting)**

### **Facts:**

- The EPA studies of human exposure to air pollutants indicate that indoor levels may be 2-5 times and sometimes 100 times higher than outdoor levels.
- Teachers and other school staff were among the top three industry sector groups for work-related asthma reported to Mass Dept. of Public Health. Other common health effects from poor EHS are: headaches, sinus and respiratory problems, tightness of chest, hoarseness, eye, nose, throat irritation, rashes, allergies, chemical sensitivities.
- There are numerous regulation, statutes and standards that apply to specific school EHS issues, but there is no indoor air quality standard that looks at a combination of factors that may cause health problems. School EHS Committees are the best mechanism for developing policies and procedures for EHS .

### **Actions:**

- Keep a log or use the MTA survey to document symptoms, health problems and school conditions that may be related to the building – particularly note date, time of day and specific activity related issues (renovations, smells from the shops).
- Help to document the history of the problems – previous inspections, reports, repairs, complaints from parents.

***If you have any other questions or concerns please contact your Association Rep.***

### **Additional Resources:**

- MTA Environmental Health and Safety Committee website: <http://www.massteacher.org/ehs>.
- Learn more about indoor air quality problems and EHS Committees using the EPA Tools For Schools Kit at <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/tfs/iaqback.html>
- For information about laws, regulations and best practices: Department of Labor Division of Occupational Safety: <http://www.mass.gov/dos/> or Mass Department of Public Health, Bureau of Environmental Health Assessment –Healthy Schools Checklist at: [www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/dph/environmental/iaq/schools\\_checklist](http://www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/dph/environmental/iaq/schools_checklist)
- Contact MassCOSH Healthy Schools Initiative for technical assistance and training at 617-825-7233 x19, [www.masscosh.org](http://www.masscosh.org)