

SCHOOL HAZARD FACTS FOR FAMILIES

UNITE FOR SCHOOLS FREE OF ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

If families and school staff work together, schools free of environmental hazards are more likely and all will benefit. See the ***Unite for Healthy Schools*** factsheet for how to do this.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

New Jersey is the most populated state in the country with 1,195 people per square mile according to the United States Census. It also has one of the highest ratios of toxic facilities per square mile in the nation. Schools are frequently built near industrial areas, railway lines and highways. They are sometimes built on contaminated soil which can be tracked into the school and by contaminated air brought in through the ventilation system or open windows and doors.

POLLUTANTS FROM TRANSPORTATION

Hazardous components of car and diesel exhaust (soot, carbon monoxide, vapors, and acid gases) can cause irritation and diseases to the respiratory system, especially to young children and asthmatics. Other components, such as benzene, can cause cancer. New Jersey has a 3 minute idling rule, NJAC 7:27-14, which is enforced by the health department in each county. If vehicle exhaust is entering the school because of idling buses, families can unite with school staff to get the buses moved away from the school.

RAILROAD ACCIDENTS AND SPILLS

Billions of gallons of petroleum crisscross the country in “virtual pipelines” which run through neighborhoods and alongside waterways. Most of this oil is being shipped in tank cars with safety flaws. The sudden flood of Bakken crude is potentially more flammable, volatile, and corrosive than traditional



crude. In 2013, a Bakken oil train derailed and exploded in Quebec, Canada killing 47 people and destroying more than 30 buildings. In New Jersey, trains pass within a few feet of homes and schools. In November 2013, an 84-car train derailed in Paulsboro, NJ spilling toxic chemicals into the air and water. When new school facilities are being planned, they should be sited away from major highways, airports, rail lines and factories. Families should join the Healthy Schools Now Coalition to participate in meetings in which new facilities are discussed.

EMERGENCY PLANNING

CHEMICAL RELEASES: The federal government passed the *Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act (EPCRA)* in 1986 following the catastrophic chemical release in Bhopal, India, that killed thousands of people. EPCRA requires facilities

with hazardous chemicals to provide inventories of chemicals as well as Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) that describe the properties and health effects of these chemicals to state and local officials and the public. Local governments, in turn, are required to prepare chemical emergency response plans. New Jersey established Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) in every county and municipality. Families can learn how to protect themselves by knowing their role in emergency situations and by meeting with the town and/or county LEPC. Review the local emergency plan to ensure it is effective. Join the Healthy Schools Now Coalition and work on improving the emergency plan.

PREVENTION OF CHEMICAL RELEASES

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) issued the state *Toxic Catastrophe Prevention Act* to require certain facilities to review whether they could switch to safer chemicals or processes so there are fewer releases to the environment and if they do occur, are less harmful. It makes sense to prevent the impact of hazardous chemicals on workers and communities by prodding facilities to use safer chemicals and processes.

SCHOOL EMERGENCY PLANS

The NJ Department of Education NJAC 6A:16-5.1 requires Districts and Schools to establish and implement a Safety and Security Plan to include how to respond to emergencies. Families can work with school staff and their unions to see if these plans exist (a copy is to be kept in each classroom), if drills are performed at least twice a year, and whether the plans are effective in protecting the students and staff.

CONTAMINATED SCHOOL SITES

New Jersey has over 18,000 known contaminated sites under remediation and tens of thousands of additional sites that have been cleaned up to some degree. Some of the state's public schools sit on or near these sites. Families can find out if their school sits on a contaminated site on the Department of Environmental Protection website (http://datamine2.state.nj.us/dep/DEP_OPRA/). If the school sits on a contaminated site, families should insist on the best remedies available: all soil that doesn't meet residential standards for clean soil should be removed and activities that are prohibited at the site should be posted.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Polluting facilities are frequently located in people of color or low-income communities. Pollution from these facilities has an adverse and disproportionate impact on the health of families. The Healthy Schools Now Coalition seeks to prevent and eliminate unfair pollution burdens on people of color and low-income communities by advocating for meaningful participation by communities and workers in environmental decision-making, and for fair treatment and equal protection under governmental laws, policies, and practices for everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic status.

Families should call the Healthy Schools Now Coalition phone number listed below for direct help with concerns about environmental hazards in their school and any other health and safety organizing issues.

This factsheet is one of a series prepared for the Healthy Schools Now Coalition by the New Jersey Work Environment Council, 7 Dunmore Ave., First Floor East, Ewing, NJ 08618 (609) 882-6100. Website at: <http://www.njwec.org/healthyschoolsnow.cfm>. Funded in part by the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey.

Healthy Schools Now is a coalition of parents, educators, students and public school advocates dedicated to ensuring that all New Jersey children and school employees learn and work in safe, modern school buildings.

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