CEA Sick Schools Survey
Executive Summary

The amount of time a child spends in school buildings during their K-12 education totals almost two full years. While in school, children change physically, emotionally, and the physical classroom environment affects their development - as well as helping or harming children's educational achievement.

The Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering found that 68 percent of the state’s schools have indoor environmental problems. Separately, more than half of teachers - 53 percent - who responded to the CEA Sick Schools Survey noted environmental problems in their classroom. They have a sick classroom. It is not surprising that teachers have the highest rate of asthma among non-industrial occupations.

CEA’s survey of teachers found that there are unhealthy classrooms throughout Connecticut. In Danbury in western Connecticut, 11 teachers reported problems. In Region 19 in rural eastern Connecticut, 10 teachers reported problems. In northern Connecticut on the border with Massachusetts, 12 teachers in Somers reported problems. Classrooms in high-, middle-, or low-income districts are sick: five reports from high-income Darien, 16 reports from middle-income Manchester, and 27 reports from low-income Waterbury. It is not surprising that principals say only additional funding for teacher salaries is more pressing than having more funding for school building maintenance.

Unhealthy air has a domino effect leading to higher rates of illness for students and teachers, increased absenteeism, and ultimately reducing the educational achievement of students. Among teachers who said their classrooms are sick, 1 in 6 reported that unhealthy air from mold, dust, or dirty classrooms are affecting them or their students’ health. It is likely that mold occurs in more classrooms because it can lurk unseen behind walls, under carpets, or in ceilings. The health consequences from exposure to mold and dust can be irreversible, so there can be lifetime consequences to children. Sometimes it is fatal. (In Connecticut, seven children die every year from asthma.)

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Thirteen teachers reported a variety of problems not listed on the survey. Exposed asbestos and raw sewage affecting the classroom are the most severe. There are also reports of “unknown” or “fuzzy” growths. One reported problem is easily resolved. A principal brings their dog to school, which is harmful to teachers and students who are allergic to dogs.

Unhealthy outside air can also cause unhealthy air in the classroom. In 2018, Fairfield County had 21 days with unhealthy air and New Haven County had 14.8 Fortunately, it is possible to turn schools with bad air into schools with good air – even when outside air is the cause.9,10,11,12

While some teachers give high marks to their school’s administrators for maintaining environmentally healthy classrooms, more said problems were not resolved or only partially resolved. Too often, administrators tell teachers that there is not enough money in the district’s budget to fix a sick classroom. The survey also found that teachers are hesitant to report problems to administrators because they are afraid of retaliation, but they submit reports anyway. “I don’t want to ruffle feathers too much, but am rethinking that decision, if it’s for the safety of my students and myself.”

Students’ educational achievement is higher when their classroom is healthy.13,14,15 Students spend a lot of time in classrooms and sick classrooms can harm education achievement resulting in both poor health and fewer career options throughout a lifetime.

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