

## SCHOOL FACILITIES & HEALTH HAZARDS IN PHILADELPHIA:

### What Parents Need to Know

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Philadelphia's children are suffering the effects of attending underfunded schools. Deteriorating school buildings and cuts to staff have led to unmet repairs, deferred maintenance, and dangerous conditions in many school buildings. It will cost the School District of Philadelphia an estimated \$4.5 billion to address deferred repairs. The cost to our children is even higher. A Philadelphia Inquirer series, called "Toxic City - Sick Schools," has highlighted health threats identified in Philadelphia public school facilities. These threats include environmental hazards such as mold and other asthma triggers, lead in paint, and asbestos. This is a guide for parent concerns and advocacy on these issues.

#### WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The health hazards caused by the disrepair of school facilities have a profound impact on student health, achievement, and teacher recruitment and retention. The poor quality of school facilities negatively affects student behavior, engagement, learning, and academic progress. Many researchers have found that schools without proper facilities and resources have major difficulty meeting the complex needs of large numbers of students.

#### WHERE CAN I FIND INFORMATION ON MY CHILD'S SCHOOL?

To review the reporting on your school, visit [The Inquirer's school checkup page](#). There, you will find lists of schools with the most environmental hazards. You can also enter your school's name and access all reports of damaged paint and plaster, damaged asbestos, potential asthma triggers, and elevated lead in water outlets. Much of this data was not previously available to the public.

The School District website is another information source. The District conducted a full "Facility Condition Assessment" of all its buildings in 2015-16. Detailed reports on facility issues in every school building are [here](#), including District buildings that are being operated by charter schools.

#### WHAT IF MY CHILD ATTENDS A CHARTER SCHOOL?

While the Inquirer series focuses on public school facilities, many charter and private schools are located in old facilities too, meaning they potentially contain similar health risks for students. You must ask your charter school about these issues. Asbestos monitoring and water testing are required by law, and charter schools are required to share this information under the [Right-to-Know law](#).

#### WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LEAD AND ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS?

Use of asbestos in buildings decreased in 1980, and lead-based paint was banned in 1978. The few dozen schools built since then should not have hazardous paint chips or dust. But the majority of the District's 300 schools are more than 40 years old, and so lead and asbestos continue to be concerns.

Federal law requires that drinking water be tested for lead, and the results of those tests from 2016-17 are [here](#). Water outlets that had lead levels above the city standard of 10 parts per billion were removed from service. Even though all water outlets were subjected to testing, the presence of lead in service lines can

cause spikes in lead levels. The safest practice is to encourage students to drink from the filtered “hydration stations;” the District has installed at least three in every school.

The Inquirer [reports](#) that toxic lead was found in loose paint chips and in drinking water in many schools. Consuming paint chips or drinking contaminated water could cause lead poisoning. There is no safe level of lead exposure for children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A blood lead level of 5 micrograms per deciliter is considered the threshold to identify children requiring case management by a physician. Even low levels of lead exposure have been associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A blood lead level of 1.7 or higher should be considered for potential evaluation for special education services or accommodations in school. See [ELC’s Impact of Lead on Learning Report](#).

The District is required by federal law to report on the status of asbestos in every school on a three-year cycle. The reports from 2015-16 are [here](#). However, the current status of repairs is not available.

### WHAT IF I HAVE A COMPLAINT ABOUT ASBESTOS?

For asbestos concerns at district schools, contact the School District’s [Department of Environmental Programs & Services](#) at 215-400-4730. If you have concerns about asbestos in any school (including charters or private schools), you can contact the [Philadelphia Department of Public Health’s asbestos hotline](#) at 215-685-7576 or the [Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection](#) complaint line at 866-255-5158.

### WHAT ABOUT ASTHMA?

Students with asthma may be at a greater risk for developing health issues related to triggers like mold or vermin. Thorough cleaning of schools lessens some of these asthma triggers, but not all schools are cleaned thoroughly. Cleaning issues can be raised with the school principal or [reported](#) to the School District’s Facilities and Maintenance office.

If your child has health issues, they may qualify for a 504 plan, which is an individualized plan to accommodate the needs of students with medical conditions and physical disabilities. To learn more about the process for obtaining a 504 plan for your child, please [view our 504 Fact Sheet](#).

### WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

The School District spends more than \$100 million annually on major facility improvements through its capital budget. But that is not enough; just the normal life-cycle replacement costs for facilities are estimated to be \$320 million annually. More funding for our schools is critically needed to keep our children safe and healthy. Current projects are detailed [here](#).

### WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

The Philly Healthy Schools Initiative has a list of [solutions](#) to address the detrimental effects of health threats on students in Philadelphia schools. Learn more about the Philly Healthy Schools Initiative by visiting their [website](#). ELC encourages parents to raise any concerns with their school administrators and the school board.

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The Education Law Center-PA (“ELC”) is a non-profit, legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, trainings, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of vulnerable children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, English language learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness.

ELC’s publications provide a general idea of the law. However, each situation is different. If questions remain about how the law applies to a particular situation, contact us for a referral or contact an attorney of your choice. Visit [www.elc-pa.org/contact](http://www.elc-pa.org/contact) or call 215-238-6970 (Philadelphia) or 412-258-2120 (Pittsburgh).