

ENVIRONMENT HEALTH COMMITTEE

Notes

HALIFAX DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD APRIL 1996

A REPORT ON SCHOOLS

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PART I

There are conditions, products and practices in our schools which can and do affect the health, behaviour, and performance of our school children and staff.

Environmental Health Issues, including the risks posed by long-term low-level chemical exposures, are gradually being recognized as hazards to human health. It is not widely understood, however, that everyone is affected to some degree when exposed to these and other contaminants. Health, behaviour, learning abilities, and more can be subtly or not so subtly affected without anyone suspecting the cause.

Many of us who are struggling to raise awareness of environmental issues in our schools have been surprised and dismayed to find that even long-known Occupational Health and Safety issues are often not being handled well. Examples include common renovations involving lead, PCB's, asbestos and other hazards which have been highly regulated for years. Combine the neglect of the long known hazards, and ignorance about the more newly recognized hazards with our natural human tendencies toward denial of the existence of problems, resistance to change, and protection of personal agendas, and we can see why things may not change as quickly as we may hope. We can also see there is potential for significant harm to come to children and staff in our schools.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COMMITTEE 1995-1996

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Report on Schools

CHILDREN AT RISK

We can attempt to address both issues, the old and some of the newer, through similar avenues. But first, an outline of the factors which, in my view, combine to put the children's health at risk. They may vary somewhat between schools and districts. I base my comments on my belief that no one means to do harm, but that a combination of factors allows health and safety issues (including children's health) to slip through the cracks.

•**School Boards** hire cleaning and maintenance managers and companies and usually allow them to operate in a hands-off fashion.

•**Maintenance and Custodial Companies are often not up to date with research and regulations.** They often subcontract work to other companies - some being more aware of health risks and Labour Law than others. Precautions cost money, and some appear to take as few precautions as possible. An example involving renovations would be:

A crew arrives at a school with little or no warning, removes and replaces ceiling tiles in an area, and is gone before anyone can realize that the tiles removed may have contained breathable asbestos fibres. Even though wearing protective gear for potentially hazardous activities is required by the Department of Labour (DoL), the workers may only be encouraged, not required by their employers to wear the gear. *The children and teachers are put at risk without even being aware of it.* This is not an isolated example. This is a common way to see work being done in the schools, although it varies from district to district. I call them, "Hit and Run" renovations.

•**School Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees (JOHSC)** are often not aware of their functions, their rights and responsibilities. Although this is primarily a staff committee, many schools include parents as non-voting committee members. Labour Law does not officially include children, but action to protect teachers and staff can indirectly protect the children, and Department of Labour (DoL) officials have shown they will not close their eyes to children at risk. Note: the DoL is proposing inclusion of Indoor Air Quality issues in the upcoming Labour Legislation, but even now some action can be taken according to acceptable and enforceable guidelines already in place. For example, if a school room appears to be affecting the occupants' health, this should be reported to the school's JOHSC. The occupants must be removed until it can be determined that the room is safe. It does not matter whether there are funds to fix it now, according to the DoL, it is not acceptable to leave people in a potentially unsafe area. If school authorities do not act to protect the room's occupants, the teacher can exercise the Right to Refuse to Work. Refer to the *N.S. Occupational Health and Safety Act, Section 2*. Getting a copy of the Act from the DoL, and asking questions of a DoL Officer would be a good idea.

•**Teachers** appear to have a general sense of powerlessness. They seem hesitant to speak their concerns, perhaps because past experience has shown them the system is hard to budge, or perhaps for fear of losing employment.

•**Parents** often trust that school officials have everything under control.

•**School Officials** do not always appear to have full knowledge of Health and Safety issues. I understand that under Labour Law, the Principal is not sure that what is happening is safe, s/he should be asking questions. I also understand that anyone involved has some responsibility (in particular the school board), and that with a legal concept called *Due Diligence*, the courts can stop the buck at the school board, lower, or higher.

•**The Departments of Health, Labour, and Environment** are largely reactive in nature. That is, they respond to complaints-but people have to know enough to complain. The Health Inspectors are now part of the Department of Environment, and are now called Environmental Health Inspectors. These inspectors as well as DoL officials are aware of mould overgrowth risks, for example, and can take action if warranted, for various reasons. A mould problem may not be obvious to a visitor, but could be found during regular inspections. Some

school boards in the Province invite regular inspections and consultations in order to identify areas needing attention and to help set priorities, but proactive practices such as this are not the norm.

THE RESULT

Combine the above factors with the following issues and we have a potentially serious situations:

Lack of funding has caused years of deferred maintenance resulting in school buildings which are in need of repair. Many of our buildings are old and contain building materials that were installed before controls were placed on many hazardous materials, including asbestos and lead paints. Many school buildings are leaking and have mould and fungal overgrowth. Ventilation systems are malfunctioning or dirty, and many have not been maintained according to manufacturer's specifications (if at all).

Many new building materials such as paints, caulking compounds, pressboard, and vinyl tiles off-gas solvents, Volatile Organic Compounds, formaldehyde, phenols, organocarbons and other chemical emissions. There are roofs to be tarred, floors to be laid or varnished, furnace fume leaks to be tended to, windows to be caulked, walls to be painted, and

much more. It is no longer acceptable to do these activities as casually as we may have done in the past. We know more now. In particular, we know that children's bodies need more protection from contaminants than is needed for adult workers. The wisdom of giving smaller doses of medications to children than to adults illustrates this basic difference. It is important to recognize this basic difference when conducting any potentially hazardous maintenance activities in our schools.

Buildings built before 1977 very probably contain lead-painted walls, and paints produced in the 1940's contained as much as 50% lead by weight. Sanding, scraping, or renovating walls is a potential risk to children in particular. A simple patch test is available locally. Ask the CMHC for their booklet *Renovation: Lead in Your Home*, and the DoL for their Guidelines.

Pesticide use in schools is a particularly potent risk to children, especially to those with respiratory conditions or allergies. There are less-toxic alternatives available and being used successfully in schools in North America and Europe. For example, by this year every school system in Texas is required to have a functioning Integrated Pest Management Program with a coordinator to oversee the program. We could do it too.

Report on Schools (con'd)

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

TO CREATE A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

- Open windows at recess and noon breaks if possible.
- Use daylight as much as possible
- Reduce or eliminate the use of scented products and encourage students to do the same.
- Reduce the amount of lamination of classroom materials.
- Do not ignore a strong or strange smell. Investigate the source.
- Sit sensitive students near openable windows
- Clean chalk ledges frequently
- Improve air circulation and ventilation, open two windows or one window and a door.
- Allow laminated materials to "off-gas" one day prior to classroom use.
- Cover the soil of plants in the classroom with marble or brick chips.

Environmental Health Physicians have strongly recommended not using carpeting of any kind in schools for the following reasons:

Carpets contain numerous chemicals which off-gas for years.

Carpets are 'sinks' for all manner of contaminants from danders to microbials.

Carpets are very hard to keep clean.

If there is any dampness source, carpets are perfect havens for mould overgrowth. Research has found rooms containing even clean carpeting contains ten times the breathable dust compared to rooms with hard floors.

Dirty Classrooms

The Nova Scotia Government's Health Inspectors have indicated the need for thoroughly cleaning classrooms at least once yearly-including walls, door and window frames, rafters, lights, shelving, library books, etc. Presently, this is not being thoroughly done in most schools.

PROGRESS IS BEING MADE

The next issue of this newsletter will report on what steps are being done to make our schools healthier places for students and staff. Watch for the continuation of this Report on Schools in the next issue, along with suggestions what steps to take if you should have some concerns with your school environment.

RESOURCE LISTING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

located at the Central Library,
Halifax District School Board

1. *Can Buildings Make You Sick?* (Nova) (Video)
2. *Clean Air Guide* (CMHC)(Video)
3. *Clean Air Guide* (CMHC)(?Book)
- Crook, William G.:**
4. *Allergy and how it affects you and your child*
5. *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome*
6. *Dr. Crook discusses Hyperactivity and the attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity, attention deficits, and other behaviour and learning problems.*
7. *Help for the hyperactive child: a good-sense guide for parents of children with hyperactivity, attention deficits, and other behaviour and learning problems.*
8. *Hypoglycemia* (low blood sugar)
9. *Solving the puzzle of your hard-to-raise child*
10. *Yeasts and how they can make you sick.*
11. *The Healthy School Handbook: Conquering the Sick Building Syndrome"*

The Marketplace

Please note: the purpose of The Marketplace is to share information with the readers, not to endorse any particular product or company.

Some chalk is *more dustless* than others. One excellent product according to some teachers, is **The Sanigene white** by Binney-Smith (Crayola).

Sunnyside Mall in Bedford is a non-smoking mall.

Barbara Holzmark makes sandals, shoes, and boots at a Main Street store in Mahone Bay. She cuts and dyes the leather herself, and this information may be helpful to people having difficulty with dyes and glues.

Travelling to Antigonish? The Best Western Claymore Inn offers rooms with water and air filters. Bedding is washed using non-allergenic detergents and cleaning supplies are also non-allergenic. No air fresheners are used. These rooms are available for a five dollar a night premium.

All no-scent white-board markers are not equal. Remove the cap to smell the marker before purchasing, if at all possible. Even though the label says "Odorfree", it is not necessarily chemically free.