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MEDIA RELEASE:

Back to School Day of Action: Clean Air in Every School as COVID Resurges

For Immediate Release: Tuesday, August 10, 2021

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(Washington, DC, Tuesday, August 10) As the new school year draws near, and COVID infections are rising in children and young adults, new reports of “long-COVID” in children and youth are posing urgent questions for schools and child care facilities, and for the 20% of the US population using schools every day: parents, students, faculty, and staff nationwide. Questions abound, in part due to a lack of clear and actionable information and support from congress and from health and government leaders at federal, state, and local levels.

The White House is leading nationwide efforts to increase COVID vaccination rates; CDC is pushing masking. But when CDC finally acknowledged the virus was airborne in May 2021 a month after the relief bills had passed, a new critical priority emerged that has not been addressed: Clean Indoor Air in Schools and the funding to address it.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) offers some support but falls far short of what schools and child care facilities need to address decades of poor indoor air. The pending infrastructure bill provides no funding for the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to address indoor air despite EPA’s 25-year history of successes with schools and communities on the topic. Further, the bill has no funds to rebuild schools and no priority on ensuring healthy indoor air/ventilation amid an array of school energy retrofit projects. Indoor Air and Energy Savings do work together, but the protocols must be deliberate, not left to chance.

Thus, as the new school year starts, the national Coalition for Healthier Schools, coordinated by Healthy Schools Network, is calling for critical and immediate actions and \$75 Million in funding to rapidly expand EPA’s capacity to mount education and technical assistance campaigns on clean indoor environments in the nation’s schools: Clean Air, Clean Water, and Clean and Healthy Products.

“Clean air in every school should be a national priority for all k-12 schools and childcare facilities,” says Claire Barnett, executive of the Healthy Schools Network. “No child should suffer a full day of polluted and or cold and flu virus-filled indoor air. Teaching suffers; learning suffers; absences and asthma rise. Children are denied the future they and the nation need.”

In the face of COVID's 4th Wave, and reports of rising COVID cases and long-COVID among children, it is increasingly clear that renewed caution and a back-to-basics- approach can help reduce the resurgent pandemic. There is nothing more basic to the primary prevention of infections than clean air, clean water, and clean, safe products and places. Children returning to school should always have healthy indoor environments in which to learn.

“The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA) has championed clean air in schools for decades, long before the current pandemic. There is strong evidence that indoor environmental exposure to poor air quality in schools plays a substantial role in triggering allergies and asthma symptoms. Nearly 1 in 13 school-age children has asthma and is a leading cause of missed school days. We must invest in our schools now. Schools should upgrade ventilation and HVAC systems to both improve the environment for children and teachers with asthma and allergies and reduce the spread of coronavirus. Inadequate ventilation also results in high levels of harmful airborne particulates and carbon dioxide levels. Repairing and refreshing aging buildings should be another top priority for investment,” commented Kenneth Mendez, President and CEO, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

Elisabeth Krautscheid, Managing Director of the national Collaborative for High Performance Schools, agrees about the need to focus on clean indoor air for children at school. “While masks and distancing are important, improving ventilation and airflow in schools is a critical defense against COVID-19. It's more critical than ever that schools have a plan, and federal/local financial support, to provide clean healthy air for students and staff.”

Unfortunately, upgrading school Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems is not getting the support and attention that is needed. Data provided by the federal Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2020 reported on the national need to update or replace school heating, ventilating, and cooling ([HVAC systems](#)). Research reported last month by [Education Week](#) notes that half the nation's schools have urgent concerns for air conditioning and ventilation.

The worst situations are in the poorest communities hardest hit by COVID, and now suffering in high heat. For decades they have had the poorest schools with no ventilation and no resources to repair facilities or provide internet access.

"Students and staff deserve to learn and teach in healthy schools with adequate ventilation systems. Proper ventilation is important when it comes to good indoor air quality and reducing the spread of COVID-19. Funding must be authorized at the state and federal level to help achieve these goals." Heather L. Sorge, Organizer, Healthy Schools Now, NJ Work Environment Council (WEC).

Not only are schools not getting the priority recognition and support they need, but unhealthy products and equipment are being sold to desperate schools in the absence of EPA's outreach and action. “Parents are concerned about indoor air quality related to what is being introduced into their children's school buildings to control the virus. We have specific concerns over the use of foggers and electrostatic sprayers which aerosolize disinfectants,” says Veronika Carella, Maryland Children's Environmental Health Coalition Legislative Director.

The applications mist into the air or cover every surface and migrate into the HVAC systems where they are heated and cooled and can contaminate indoor air. Children thus have increased risk of exposures to disinfectants which are EPA registered as anti-microbial pesticides. For example, Maryland and New York laws on safer pest control and on green cleaning do not address disinfectants, putting children and staff at greater risk.

Indoor air is not the only issue where the nation is falling short when it comes to protecting school environments. “Every child deserves to have a safe, clean ride to school. However, twenty-five million students in the US are breathing in harmful exhaust each school day while riding on a dirty school bus,” says Jamie Wetz, of Generation 180. “Electric school buses protect children’s health by eliminating tailpipe emissions, and they can also help school districts save an estimated \$170,000 in lifetime fuel and maintenance costs per vehicle. We need to provide clean air in every school bus by transitioning the nation’s 480,000 school buses to electric.”

US EPA: \$75 Million Clean Air in Schools Needed

Time is short to make better decisions for children going to school. With some schools already open and more reopening in the days and weeks ahead, congress and states must do more to invest in children’s safety and future. “We need to make sure schools and communities have the information and assistance they need to improve indoor air and ventilation and to find and use safe products and equipment to clean and disinfect” Barnett adds, “This includes \$75 Million in annual funding: \$65M for the EPA to conduct national outreach, education, and training on improving Indoor Environmental Quality in Schools and \$10M to expand children’s environmental health protections.”

“Over 150 years ago, Horace Mann noted that students would stay away from ‘repulsive, unhealthful schoolhouses,’” reminds Brent Ibata, PhD, JD, MPH, of Florida, a long-time champion for healthy places for all children. “This fall, unless schools can guarantee clean air free of COVID when the school year begins, parents and students will likely stay away in large numbers rather than risk exposure to unhealthy schools that could send home a deadly virus.” Commented indoor air scholar Paula Olsiewski, PhD, Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security/Bloomberg School of Public Health, “In addition to masks and vaccinations, we can do more to protect our children by improving indoor ventilation.”

Funding US EPA to address Indoor Environments and children’s health in the nation’s schools, is championed by US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and a score of other Senators to whom Healthy Schools Network and our many partners are deeply grateful. In a new effort, the Network is thrilled to support a new back to school bill introduced by US Ed Senator Markey (D-MA) and Representatives Bowman (NY-16) and Levin (MI-9) to remediate [Toxics in Schools](#), including PCBs and stores of old, outdated hazardous chemicals in chemistry closets and cabinets. “This is heroic work,” said Barnett. “Schools are filled with unsung heroes from the pandemic year. It is wonderful to see more heroes among elected officials championing the tough work of ensuring healthful learning places for all children.”

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