

Local association action plan

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Since there is no ergonomics standard, it is up to local associations to negotiate ergonomic fixes mentioned in this article and the resources listed in the sidebar. Locals should work with their UniServ field representatives to survey the school and staff to document problems, and then approach the district about implementing solutions. The Ohio best practices document in the resources sidebar has return-on-investment data that can help locals show districts that solutions can save money.

Locals should also:

- Make sure injured staff members report their injuries, receive appropriate medical care, and file for workers' compensation.
- Make sure districts enter injuries on the Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) "Log of Work-Related Injuries and Illnesses."
- Keep the membership informed of progress.

Resources

NEA Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) Handbook

www.nea.org/home/29829.htm

Working Safer and Easier – For Janitors, Custodians, and Housekeepers, CAL/OSHA Consultation Service

www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/dosh_publications/Janitors.pdf

Ergonomics Best Practices for Public Employers, Ohio Bureau of Workers Compensation

www.ohiobwc.com/downloads/brochureware/publications/PESafeGrant.pdf

NJEA Health and Safety Manual on Workers' Compensation, pages 72 to 76

www.njea.org/pdfs/HSMannual_2007Revise.pdf

"Computer ergonomics prevent pain," NJEA Reporter, January 2007

www.njea.org/pdfs/HS_ComputerErgonomics_Jan07.pdf

OSHA Computer Ergonomics eTool

www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/computerworkstations/index.html

Negotiate ergonomics to stop the pain

Many New Jersey public school employees have suffered sprains, strains, muscle tears, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and hernias that could have been avoided with relatively simple changes in workplace ergonomics. More than a temporary nuisance, such injuries often lead to reduced productivity, lost time from work, temporary or permanent disability, and inability to perform job tasks.

A sense of the magnitude of these musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) can be gained from a statistical survey of occupational injuries and illnesses conducted each year from

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employer reports. No job category is immune to workplace injuries, and the data is almost certainly an underestimate because not all injuries are reported.

The N.J. Department of Labor and Workforce Development Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses showed 1,040 MSDs among New Jersey public school employees in 2007 and 2008 combined. Injured staff lost a median of seven full days away from work in 2007 and nine days in 2008.

Risky work tasks

Many workplace injuries are not the result of accidents. Many injuries take weeks, months, or even years to develop and result from unhealthy working conditions related to:

- Driving a bus or operating heavy equipment
- Frequent or heavy lifting, carrying, pushing, or pulling
- Awkward postures and movements such as bending, stretching, squatting, climbing, crawling, reaching, and twisting
- Spending most of the day on one's feet

- Using vibrating hand tools
- Repeating the same motions over and over
- Using force to complete a task
- Sitting at a desk in front of a computer all day

Prevention is possible

The good news is that most of these disorders are preventable. Ergonomics—the science of fitting workplace conditions and job demands to the capabilities of workers—can be used to make work fit the body instead of the other way around. Here are some fixes for common hazards:

- **All occupations:** Plan work so there will be breaks or changes in activity.
- **Occupations with standing:** Use anti-fatigue mats. Change posture periodically. Rest one foot on a stool.
- **Occupations with lifting:** Use carts for moving books and heavy materials. Break heavy loads into smaller loads. Practice good lifting techniques.
- **Custodial:** Remove obstacles that obstruct the rolling of carts and mop buckets. Locate sinks on the ground for dumping mop buckets. Pad broom handles. Alternate hands often. Install automated winches for raising and lowering basketball backboards. Retrofit gym bleachers for automated moving. Use a moving dolly to move desks.

- **Maintenance:** Provide adequate clearance for access to areas for maintenance tasks. Use a sturdy stool or ladder to reach heights.
- **Bus drivers:** Provide adjustable seats and steering wheels, arm rests, automatic transmissions, automatic power doors, and wide pedals with heelrests.
- **Food Service:** Reposition supplies, dishes, implements, and water nozzles to avoid reaching. Raise trays, supplies, and other materials up off the floor to avoid stooping and bending. Position work surfaces at elbow level. Store heavy or frequently lifted supplies at knee to shoulder level. Use automatic can opener.
- **Computer work:** See January 2007 NJEA Reporter article and OSHA Ergonomics eTool listed in sidebar.

No ergonomics standard

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) adopted an ergonomics standard in the last days of the Clinton Administration. One of the first acts of the Bush Administration was to rescind that standard using the Congressional Review Act (CRA), which gives Congress a way to overturn federal regulations without hearings, committee approval, or amendments.

CRA also bars issuance of any new rule that is "substantially the same" as a revoked rule. The Obama Administration will need to take a new approach if it wishes OSHA to regulate ergonomics.

