

Health & safety is a great organizing tool

Health and safety issues are everywhere, affect everyone, and are often a key reason why members are unhappy at work. Therefore, it is a great organizing tool. Start with a "winnable" issue that is relatively easy to resolve and affects many members. Improving housekeeping often meets this objective – even if it is just soap and towels in the restrooms. In this way, organizing members around health and safety can be an effective way to get some visible changes and build your local association. A health and safety committee also helps its members to develop leadership skills. They learn to work together, speak up, and take action. The following steps provide an approach to health and safety that is proven and effective:

- Work with your UniServ field rep to set goals & develop an action plan
- Form a health & safety committee
- Identify and document hazards
- Develop solutions
- Inform members and allies
- Take collective action

Growing a health and safety committee

A local association health and safety committee can do many things, but there is no need to do them all at once. The important thing is to start somewhere.

- Consult your UniServ field rep
- Elect chairperson & meet regularly
- Ensure all bargaining units in the school or district are represented
- Decide on goals
- Consult with building reps regularly
- Inspect the workplace regularly
- Obtain industrial hygiene monitoring results & medical monitoring results
- Review records
- Review hazard control programs
- Investigate accidents
- Audit chemicals in labs and classrooms
- Review occupational safety and health standards
- Meet with administrators, board members, contractors, and all stakeholders
- Participate in labor-management health and safety committee
- Maintain a resource library
- Attend health and safety training sessions
- Collaborate with the Right To Know and PEOSH programs
- Develop contract language
- Use the contract
- Develop allies in the community
- Provide accurate information to the media, if necessary

Health & safety committees are blossoming all over!

Any effort to make schools safer and healthier must involve NJEA members. And perhaps the single best vehicle for member involvement is the health and safety committee.

Experience shows that there is an advantage to having a union-only committee that is independent of management. Joint labor-management committees can provide a useful forum to work together with the administration, but a union committee allows members to choose their own issues and solutions. They can freely discuss problems and strategize to solve them. Here is what is happening with committees in four local associations.

The North Plainfield Education Association knew that water coming into the East End School building could lead to both structural damage and mold problems. Despite many discussions and numerous member complaints to administration, nothing happened. So they took action and contacted UniServ Field Rep Vickie Hendrickson, who called in the N.J. Work Environment Council (WEC), a frequent NJEA partner, to conduct training about how to form a health and safety committee. Once they knew a health and safety committee was one of the most effective tools to use to correct health and safety problems in their schools, they organized their own committee.

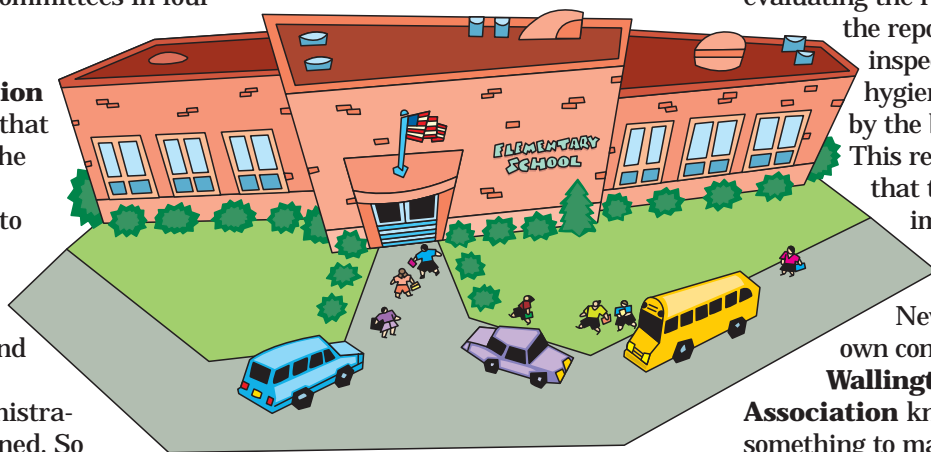
Their biggest concern was that members were getting sick, so they sent around the Work-Related Health Problems Report from the NJEA Health and Safety Manual to all the members in the school. The survey revealed the locations and general symptoms of those who were ill. They now had "proof" it wasn't one "troublemaker" who "liked to complain," but most of the teachers in the school felt ill while at school. The illnesses stopped being called "rumors," and became facts. With this data in hand, they knew they could talk with the administration and the board more effectively.

East Orange Education Association

With 21 schools within the East Orange School District, the health and safety committee needed an efficient way to evaluate them all. With the help of UniServ Field Rep

Dennis Grieco and EOEA President Jacqui Greadington, they developed contract language that established a permanent Joint Labor-Management Advisory Committee to the superintendent. Because of this language they meet on paid time and on an equal footing with district administration five times per year.

The committee meets monthly, includes local association building representatives, and is chaired by member Clarence Osborne. They conduct on-site walkthrough evaluations of a school in the district to look at health and safety conditions on a bimonthly basis. They conduct follow-



up walkthroughs three weeks later. By documenting facility concerns on forms they have developed, the committee can follow up with the board of education. At these joint labor-management meetings the committee discusses the status of various projects, accomplishments during the past months, and how to correct unsafe conditions.

By meeting regularly in a formal setting, the committee avoids the put-out-the-fire approach when a problem arises and has a formal way to address problems. The committee has eliminated many health and safety hazards before they caused more serious problems. After five years, the committee has now visited every school in the district.

The **Pinelands Regional Education Association** was concerned because several teachers in the Pinelands Regional Junior High School media center and in the rooms above had used all their sick days and had lost salary due to illnesses. Because they felt the illnesses were work-related, they wanted to fight for back pay and reinstatement of the teachers' sick days. After consulting with their UniServ Field Rep Meredith Barnes, they decided to use the grievance procedure. PREA President Pat Kloc who chairs the Health and Safety Committee along with Art Gruber took action.

After surveying the teachers and reviewing those surveys, they documented the areas of concern with photographs. With WEC's technical help they began the process of eliminating the possibilities of what could cause the teachers in the media center to feel weak and disoriented. Prime suspects were ozone from large copying machines that were in an area with no ventilation, sewer gases entering through a waterless drain trap, and a leaking internal sewage pipe.

The health and safety committee is currently seeking sewage schematic drawings from the superintendent and evaluating the recommendations in the reports from a PEOSH inspection and industrial hygiene consultants hired by the board of education. This review will help ensure that the school system implements all recommendations made by the state of New Jersey and their own consultants.

Wallington Education Association knew it needed to do something to make their school buildings safe for teachers, support staff, and students. Wallington EA President Christina Zalewski and UniServ Field Rep Rose Ann Spina called WEC for training and technical assistance. Because of a cancer cluster scare, the physical education teachers at the Gavlak School had had their desks moved and were only allowed into certain areas to retrieve equipment. They decided to form a district-wide health and safety committee made up of nurses and teachers from the three schools. WEC supplied the local association with fact sheets, surveys, and PEOSH standards so that committee members would have copies of pertinent laws and relevant information.

The committee was also concerned with planned construction in the Gavlak School during the summer. During the training, this committee of dedicated members learned what to watch out for during renovation and construction.