

Beware “temporary” classrooms



Of the estimated 100,000 public school classrooms in New Jersey, thousands are considered “temporary” – although in truth most of them remain in use indefinitely. While temporary classrooms may sometimes be necessary, they must also be healthy and safe for staff and students. The use of temporary classrooms began decades ago as increasing student enrollments led to overcrowding. Widespread are single and double-wide trailers that sit apart from permanent school buildings. Just as familiar are hallways, coat rooms, closets, and other storage spaces inside permanent school buildings that are pressed into service by districts, often to house small classes such as speech therapy and child study teams.

The number of temporary classrooms has increased since 2001 when requirements for pre-school for 3- and 4-year olds began to go into effect. As these requirements take effect for additional districts, more trailers are likely to be used, although not necessarily for preschool students. Older students are more likely to be placed in trailers because of safety considerations.

Temporary classrooms are also used during school construction, especially during total renovations when all staff and students are temporarily relocated. The Schools Development Authority (SDA) owns 239 Temporary Classrooms Units (TCUs), which are trailers leased to high-poverty school districts to use as classrooms. SDA also owns or leases buildings, often parochial schools that have closed, that are then leased to districts. These, too, are considered temporary classrooms.

Problems

- The most common problems with inside storage spaces used as classrooms include:

- Tiny or no windows and therefore inadequate natural light and ventilation
- Inadequate or no mechanical ventilation
- Inadequate or no temperature regulation
- Inadequate artificial lighting
- Inadequate amount of space
- The most common problems with trailers used as classrooms include:

- Poorly functioning heating, ventilation, air-conditioning (HVAC) systems that provide insufficient ventilation with outside air
- Poor acoustics from loud ventilation systems
- Chemical off-gassing of formaldehyde and other toxic materials from pressed wood and other high-emission materials
- Water entry and mold growth
- Site pollution from nearby parking lots or loading areas

Solutions

New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) facility regulations cover classroom design and construction requirements. Some useful provisions are listed below. Page numbers refer to regulations on the NJDOE website listed in the Resources section.

General requirements:

- Minimum classroom dimension is 10 feet, Page 81
- Any classroom without sufficient windows must be air-conditioned, except gyms, shops, kitchens, and locker rooms, Page 82
- Minimum lighting, Pages 83 to 84
- At least one general toilet room for each sex on each floor occupied by students, Page 84
- Temporary spaces in an existing public school must:
- Comply with applicable requirements of the Uniform Construction Code (UCC), evidenced by a valid certificate of occupancy for educational use, Page 98
- Have floors, walls, and ceiling free from moisture, peeling paint, plaster, and potentially hazardous materials, Page 99

- Have door hardware that permits egress from the room at all times, Page 99
- Have provision for the storage of students’ clothing other than a corridor or exit way, Page 99
- Have a telephone connected to the main office, Page 99

Trailers must:

- Comply with applicable requirements of the Uniform Construction Code (UCC), evidenced by a valid certificate of occupancy for educational use, Page 101
- Have two means of clear and unobstructed egress remote from each other, Page 101
- Have heat which provides a temperature of 68 F, Page 101
- Have ceiling and wall materials certified free of toxic materials, Page 101.

Resources

NJDOE Educational Facility Regulations, N.J.A.C. 6A:26:

www.state.nj.us/education/code/current/title6a/chap26.pdf

EPA Portable Classrooms webpage:

www.epa.gov/iaq/schooldesign/portables.html

CHPS Best Practices Manual and Assessment Tool for Relocatable Classrooms, 154 Pages, 2009:

www.betterbuildingsbetterstudents.org/dev/Drupal/node/41

NJEA Health and Safety Manual: Indoor Air Quality in Schools, Pages 267 to 277:

www.njea.org/pdfs/HManual_2007Revise.pdf

Summary of the Uniform Construction Code:

www.state.nj.us/dca/codes/forms/pdf/sum_of_ucc.pdf

Bulletin on Temporary Certificates of Occupancy:

www.nj.gov/dca/codes/bulletins_ftos/list_of_bulletins_ftos/b01_2.pdf

Local association action plan

Local associations should work with their UniServ field representative to ensure that districts provide temporary classrooms that are safe and healthy for staff and students. Here are things to challenge the district on and, if necessary, mobilize with parents for:

Compliance: All temporary classrooms should meet the requirements of the NJDOE facility regulations summarized above and the Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) standard. See the NJEA Health and Safety Manual for more information on the IAQ standard.

Maintenance: The district should establish a regular and timely plan for testing, inspecting, and performing specific maintenance tasks. They should inspect roofs, ceilings, walls, floors, and carpets for evidence of water leakage or stains, and for mold growth or odor. They should replace water-damaged materials promptly and fix leaks as soon as possible.

Flush Out: Prior to use of any new trailer or one that has been unused, the district should operate the HVAC continuously for several days.

Ventilation: The HVAC system should provide a minimum of 15 cubic feet per minute (CFM) of outdoor air per occupant. Outdoor air should be supplied continuously while the trailer is occupied.

Communication: Districts should instruct teachers and maintenance staff on proper use and settings of thermostat and ventilation controls.

Replacement: Trailers shouldn’t be used beyond the recommended life of the unit, never more than 20 years, assuming excellent maintenance. Old units are likely to have problems, be energy inefficient and should be retired. Modernization of old units may be possible.

Quality: When specifying new trailers for lease or purchase, districts should specify high quality, following the guidelines given by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and California’s Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS). See the Resources section for websites. Some important things to specify:

- No- and low-emitting building materials*
- Outdoor air intakes not located underneath the unit*
- Covered entries with entry mat*
- Acoustical upgrades to HVAC, windows, doors, ceiling tiles, and carpeting*

Sensible siting: Siting should be away from noise sources like highways and pollution sources like parking areas. Site and orient to maximize the benefits of daylight coming in windows. Install proper grading and drainage systems under and around the trailer and skirts to discourage weeds and vermin.