Background

Many public schools in New Jersey are old and deteriorating. Leaking roofs, crumbling plaster, rodent and insect infestation, and substandard plumbing, electrical and ventilation systems are just some of the common problems. New Jersey’s Education Facilities Construction and Financing Act is aimed at reversing decades of neglect with a program to restore and rebuild school buildings. The law commits the state to providing public school education “...in physical facilities that are safe, healthy, and conducive to learning.”

This fact sheet provides information about potential health hazards associated with school renovation and how to prevent them. It also includes references to state and federal laws and regulations that may be of use in preventing or eliminating hazards.

State and Federal Right-to-Know Laws

New Jersey Worker and Community RTK Law

N.J.A.C. 8:59-7.2 (j) Requires public employers to supply hazardous substance fact sheets and material safety data sheets to public employees and their representatives for all hazardous substances brought into a public employer’s facility, including surrounding land, by a public or private subcontractor.

http://www.nj.gov/health/workplacehealthandsafety/right-to-know/

PEOSH Hazard Communication (Haz Com) Standard, Call 609-984-1863

N.J.A.C. 12:100-7.2 (d) 2. Requires public employers to make sure that copies of the MSDSs for hazardous chemicals are readily accessible to public employees during each work shift while they are in their respective work areas.


OSHA Hazard Communication Standard Call 1-800-321-6742

29CFR 1910.1200 (e)(2) Requires private sector employers, like contractors, to describe in detail in a written Hazard Communication Program how employees, like school employees, will be protected from hazardous substances brought into other workplaces, like schools, by those contractors.

www.osha.gov/dsg/hazcom/index.html
Renovations

Hazards associated with renovation include dust; lead-contaminated debris; asbestos fibers; noise; fumes from equipment and from toxic products such as paints, roofing cements and glues etc., and from new furnishings. Precautions are needed to prevent health and safety hazards to students, school employees, and construction workers.

Construction & Demolition

A variety of dusts are produced during construction of new schools and demolition of old schools. These dusts can come from lead paint, metal, wood, plastic, brick and cement. Ironically, cleanup – especially sweeping – is the activity that can produce the most dust. Excavation, blasting, foundation work, electrical and plumbing work can also produce large amounts of dust. The most prevalent adverse health effect of dust is asthma, including wheezing, tightness in the chest, coughing and shortness of breath. Occupational asthma is usually reversible, but permanent lung damage can occur if exposure to the substance that causes the disease continues. In highly sensitive persons, even very low levels of exposure may provoke an asthmatic episode. In addition to dust, demolition and construction can also cause excessive noise, falling objects, exposure to carbon monoxide and fuel exhaust – usually from diesel-powered machinery, and fumes from welding.

Asbestos

Asbestos can be found throughout many schools, in products such as shingles, floor and ceiling tiles, cement pipe, roofing products and insulation for boilers. Most asbestos exposures in school buildings occur during removal of these products, since most new building materials no longer contain asbestos. Asbestos fibers are considered relatively safe when they are firmly bonded or compacted within other material, such as wallboard or floor tile. However, when asbestos-containing materials are loose or crumbling because of water damage, abrasion or sloppy repair work, they can release microscopic fibers into the air. This form of asbestos – called “friable” – poses the greatest health risk. Exposure, either through inhalation or ingestion, can potentially lead to lung scarring and cancer. See NJEA brochure, “Asbestos Hazards in Schools.”

Under the federal Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act (AHERA), every public school in the nation is supposed to be inspected for asbestos. Wherever asbestos is found, the school board is supposed to develop an asbestos management plan. The plan should detail the location and condition of any asbestos found in the school and how the asbestos should be handled in each instance. Friable asbestos is to be removed, encapsulated, or enclosed. Nonfriable asbestos is to be monitored for signs of deterioration and, if it becomes damaged, it should be treated as friable. By knowing where the asbestos is, custodians and contractors can be sure not to disturb it during the normal course of their work. However, oversight of this law is woefully lacking and although many AHERA reports are complete and available to the public, many are not. If a school has fulfilled its legal obligation and developed an asbestos management plan, it should be available for review by school employees.

Other key laws regulating asbestos include the NJ Public Employee Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) Program’s Asbestos Standard 29 CFR 1910.1001 (which covers routine housekeeping activities in buildings) and the PEOSH Asbestos Standard for Construction, 29 CFR 1926.1101 (which applies to building demolition and renovation operations and other activities where asbestos is removed or encapsulated – and also covers building maintenance and emergency cleanup of asbestos spills). Both standards set a maximum exposure limit and include provisions for engineering controls (e.g. isolation, enclosure, local exhaust ventilation, and dust collection). They also mandate respirators, protective clothing, exposure monitoring, hygiene facilities and practices, warning signs, labeling, record-keeping, and medical exams (for any workers in areas with an airborne asbestos hazard). In addition, the laws prohibit the following work practices:

- Dry sweeping, dusting, shoveling or vacuuming of asbestos material, debris, waste, or dust.
- Using compressed air to clean surfaces contaminated with asbestos or to remove asbestos unless it is used with a ventilation system that can capture the dust cloud.
- Sanding of asbestos-containing flooring material.

Lead

The primary source of lead in schools is deteriorating paint. As with asbestos, lead paint that is in good repair and is not flaking or crumbling poses minimal risk. However, paint can become a threat when it is damaged due to abrasion, poor maintenance, water damage, or construction. Indeed, renovation can release lead particles, especially if it involves breaking through a lead-painted wall or ceiling. Adverse health effects of exposure to lead include damage to the nervous system and kidneys. Low-level exposure can cause a range of physical and mental problems, including loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, moodiness, headaches, anemia, and high blood pressure. Children are particularly vulnerable. Lead can impair the developing brain and nervous systems, causing various developmental, learning and behavioral disabilities. Lead, like asbestos, is regulated by a number of laws, including PEOSH Standard 29 CFR 1926.62 (for construction), and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s regulations regarding containment and disposal of hazardous waste. PEOSH law mandates that a “competent person” should review all site operations and stipulate the specific engineering controls and work practices designed to reduce worker exposure to lead.

Engineering measures include local and general exhaust ventilation, process and equipment modification (e.g. blasting techniques that are less dusty), substi-
tion of safer materials for those containing lead, replacement of equipment and furnishings that contain lead, and isolation of renovation work that may disturb lead paint.

Roofing
Roof renovations may involve several different types of applications, including coal-tar pitch and asphalt. Coal-tar pitch dust is a confirmed human carcinogen. Alternative methods including synthetic membrane applications use adhesives, primers and sealants that contain toxic solvents and, in some cases, asbestos. Acute exposure to solvents can cause a variety of short-term ailments, and prolonged exposure can cause a range of chronic health effects, from asthma to cancer.

Flooring
Many solvent-based products are still widely used in the installation and finishing of hardwood floors. They are often highly flammable and/or combustible and pose a significant risk of fire and explosion. When improperly handled they may cause acute or chronic health effects in workers. Adhesives, sealers and varnish contain organic solvents and other substances including epoxies, formaldehyde, polyurethane, and additives.

Painting
Painting can introduce many toxic substances into the school environment in addition to paints. These include strippers, primers, and thinners which are likely to contain toxic solvents that evaporate and contaminate indoor air. Although more and more paint is water-based, most paint still contains at least some measure of toxic volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Adverse health effects include skin dryness, respiratory irritation; and with greater exposure, dizziness or nausea, as well as asthma and more serious diseases such as cancer.

New Furnishings
Formaldehyde, one of the most common pollutants in school buildings, is found in furniture, new carpets, particle board, plywood, and many other products associated with renovation. As it deteriorates, formaldehyde gives off fumes which – even at low levels – can cause irritation of the eyes and respiratory system. Recent studies show that prolonged exposure may cause cancer.

What School Employees Can Do To Reduce Renovation Hazards

Work through Local Associations
Health and safety hazards arising from school renovations should be addressed through your local association. The association can formally request information from the district about any building renovations that will be occurring. Once information from the district is in hand, the association – through its health and safety committee or internal structure – can also develop a plan to prevent hazards. The plan can use this fact sheet as a basis for proceeding, along with other strategies and resources, including NJEA’s health and safety training program.

Use N.J.’s Indoor Air Law
Although there is no federal law regulating indoor air quality in buildings, New Jersey enacted the PEOSH Indoor Air Quality Standard (NJAC 12:100-13) which requires renovation or new construction that produces health hazards to be safeguarded by local ventilation or other controls to ensure the safety of employees. NJEA members can push for compliance with the key provisions of this law which include:

- **Work with parent and community groups to eliminate and/or prevent hazardous conditions.**
- **Know laws.**
- **Communicate an important step in any attempt to solve health and safety problems. Nobody knows better what problems exist in the school – and the best solutions – than the people who work there every day.**
- **Ensure that training is provided through inservice days.**
- **Assure that the district complies with the N.J. Public Employee Occupational Safety and Health Act (PEOSH).**
- **Contact your association representative immediately. Your local or the NJEA UniServ office can help you with Workers’ Compensation. You are entitled under state law (N.J.S.A. 34A:30-2.1) “…to full salary without loss of sick days for up to one year…” and all medical treatment.**
- **File grievances regarding unsafe conditions using existing contract language.**
- **Contact your association representative immediately. Your local or the NJEA UniServ office can help you with Workers’ Compensation. You are entitled under state law (N.J.S.A. 34A:30-2.1) “…to full salary without loss of sick days for up to one year…” and all medical treatment.**
- **See that training is provided through inservice days.**
- **Assure that the district complies with the N.J. Public Employee Occupational Safety and Health Act (PEOSH).**
- **Work with parent and community groups to eliminate and/or prevent hazardous conditions.**
- **Local exhaust systems should pull polluted vapors away from people’s breathing area and they should not compete with the primary ventilation system.**
- **Inadequate ventilation or protective equipment should be substituted for more toxic substances, such as oil-based paints.**
- **Workers handling hazardous chemicals should be protected with adequate ventilation or protective equipment, such as respirators.**
- **Information about toxic substances should be on hand for school employees, as required by Right-to-Know laws.**

For Assistance:

**Talk to Your Co-Workers**
Communication is the most important step in any attempt to solve health and safety problems. Nobody knows better what problems exist in the school – and the best solutions – than the people who work there every day.

**What your association can do:**
- Form a health and safety committee to monitor conditions in the workplace.
- Negotiate health and safety language.
- File grievances regarding unsafe conditions using existing contract language.
- See that training is provided through inservice days.
- Assure that the district complies with the N.J. Public Employee Occupational Safety and Health Act (PEOSH).
- Work with parent and community groups to eliminate and/or prevent hazardous conditions.