

How schools can become air quality champions this year

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October 5, 2022



Federal funds will enable school systems to prioritize air quality initiatives, including repairs, upgrades, and entirely new systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected every aspect of our lives for more than two years, but perhaps the hardest hit population were children who suddenly found themselves unable to go to school. This was disruptive not only from an educational standpoint, but socially, as well. That's why school districts have done everything in their power so that children can experience a normal 2022–2023 school year. But that can only happen if superintendents make safety a top priority to prevent coronavirus outbreaks that could derail their carefully planned back-to-school plans. And it all starts with air quality.

This isn't just a local issue. Over the coming months, the Biden administration will be honoring and highlighting school districts who are excelling in their efforts to improve indoor air quality. It's a great opportunity for leaders to be recognized for their amazing work, and to instill confidence in a public that is still skeptical that the worst days of the pandemic are behind us.

According to a recent statement from the White House, in addition to vaccines, boosters, and COVID tests, one of the pillars of keeping schools open is, "helping schools plan and implement indoor air quality improvements." Schools will have access to federal funds to optimize ventilation through inspection, repairs, upgrades, and replacements in their HVAC systems, as well as installing new systems that facilitate better ventilation.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are providing guidance to help schools develop best practices; and the Department of Energy (DOE) has launched the Efficient and Healthy Schools campaign to help schools implement new technologies and approaches to improve ventilation.

The DOE effort includes a number of initiatives, but one that school administrators may want to pay special attention to is the recognition of "champion schools and districts who are leading the way on indoor air quality." The administration will issue criteria for this award in the next few weeks, so savvy administrators will want to keep a close eye on the DOE website for details.

In addition, the Department of Education's Green Ribbon Schools program allows schools to earn federal accolades for their sustainability work that exhibits indoor air quality, resource efficiency and conservation, and environmental learning.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit North America in early 2020, most of us didn't know much about it. In fact, scientists had differing opinions on how it spread — remember how all of us spent months wiping down grocery bags with sanitizer, lest a stray molecule find its way onto our hands and then into our lungs? Over time, it would become apparent that this was an airborne disease, and the best method to stay safe was to avoid close physical proximity with other people to prevent sharing contaminated air. As a result, the public response to the pandemic shifted to congregating in outdoor spaces and avoiding small, poorly ventilated areas.

But as vaccines and boosters became available, people slowly began making their way back into indoor spaces, albeit with strong social distancing restrictions to prevent overcrowding. By the end of 2021, most school districts in North America were at least partially providing in-person instruction. And despite a number of variants that have caused mild and moderate disruptions over the last year, it appears that we are well on our way to a return to how life was before any of us had ever heard of COVID-19. That doesn't mean that we should let our guard down.

It is impossible to overstate how important it is for schools to maintain the highest possible air quality. According to the EPA, "studies of human exposure to air pollutants indicate that indoor levels of pollutants may be two to five times — and occasionally more than 100 times — higher than outdoor levels." That puts classrooms squarely in the crosshairs of potential flareups and illness clusters over the next few months. And while there isn't a single magic button that will prevent anyone from getting sick, by implementing best practices, school boards stand a better chance of keeping classrooms open and kids healthy. And after so many years of disruption, that should be one goal that all of us can agree on.