



## Research Brief

### A New School Lesson

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When we environmental experts think of the environment, we usually think of hazardous waste, ambient air and water pollution, or destruction of trees, biodiversity, wildlife, and natural areas. We usually think of the subjects covered by the seven landmark environmental laws that Congress passed and EPA has enforced since the 1970s, when ELI and EPA began. Yet, one of our longest running and most respected Research and Policy Division programs addresses an area largely unregulated by these laws. Indoor air pollution is one of the most significant environmental threats to our health.

Americans spend up to 90 percent of their time indoors. Research shows that poor indoor air quality can lead to a host of health problems, including cancer and respiratory illnesses. Asthma, a condition that can be triggered by a variety of indoor pollutants, now afflicts about 20 million Americans, including 6.3 million children. It leads to 2 million emergency room visits and 5,000 deaths per year in the United States and is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. According to EPA, one indoor pollutant, radon, is responsible for approximately 21,000 deaths in the United States every year — almost 3,000 among people who have never smoked. One in every 15 homes nationwide has a radon level at or above EPA's recommended action level.

The hurricanes of 2005 brought popular attention to problems linked to indoor environmental pollutants such as mold and carbon monoxide, an area that ELI has been researching for years. Since creating the *Indoor Environments*

*Program* over 15 years ago to confront this dramatic public health threat, ELI has been a national leader in the search for solutions. Led by Senior Attorney Tobie Bernstein, our staff deploys research, technical assistance, and training to help policymakers, advocates, school administrators, citizens, and government officials reduce these risks. On any given day, Tobie's team might be providing a written overview of state policy models for addressing indoor air quality in schools to a Tennessee senator developing state legislation, and on another they may be helping grassroots advocates in Connecticut strengthen the state's indoor air quality laws.

Because schools are so essential to our children and our communities, much of ELI's work in this area is dedicated to improving school environments. Indoor pollutants can damage the health of both children and staff, making concentration on learning and teaching more difficult.

An estimated 20 percent of the American populace spend our days in school buildings, yet the Government Accountability Office has found that fully one third of the nation's schools require extensive repair or replacement. Nearly one fifth of schools, with over 8 million students among them, report indoor air quality problems.

Tobie's ground-breaking 2002 report *Healthier Schools: A Review of State Policies For Improving Indoor Air Quality* has helped policymakers and advocates around the country develop legislative initiatives to prevent and remedy school indoor air quality problems. Another of our most frequently downloaded reports, the 2005 *School District Liability for Indoor*

*Air Quality Conditions*, clarifies legal issues raised by the recent wave of indoor air quality litigation. ELI staff regularly speaks to groups such as the National Environmental Health Association and the Illinois Healthy Schools Campaign to help make this research useful to advocates around the country.

Some of the worst problems have occurred in relatively new buildings. With tens of billions of dollars to be invested in school building programs in the coming years, states and school districts have an important opportunity to maximize their investment. ELI promotes healthy, high performance school planning, design, and construction — an approach that integrates health and environmental goals to create buildings that are healthier, more environmentally responsible, and less expensive to operate.

Our 2003 publication *Building Healthy, High Performance Schools* showcased the policies and programs of model communities that are transforming how they build school facilities. In our own community, ELI has offered an ongoing series of local symposiums on greener schools for D.C. area education officials.

The Indoor Environments Program strengthens state and local policies in many areas of the law — not only in the environmental arena, but also in health, labor, education, and property. Employing a broad range of policy strategies, these laws, regulations, and guidance can play an important role in changing behavior and establishing best practices. Our work makes the complex and evolving arena of indoor air quality policy understandable to those interested in reform and gives them the practical tools they need to effect change.

Keep an eye on our indoor environment and green building web page at [www2.eli.org/research/gbie.htm](http://www2.eli.org/research/gbie.htm) for new information about indoor air quality in schools, multi-family housing, and home construction. And, as always, please share your expertise and questions with us.