

Asbestos in Schools | A Guide for Parents & Faculty

 asbestos.com/asbestos/schools/

Asbestos in Schools: A Guide for Parents & Administrators

Many of America's students, teachers and school staff are at danger of asbestos exposure because the deadly carcinogen lurks behind walls, above ceilings and under floors in older schools across the United States. Understanding the risks and how to avoid asbestos could protect their safety.



Understanding the Risks of Asbestos Exposure in Schools

When asbestos products are damaged or wear down over time, they put students, teachers and other school employees at risk of asbestos exposure.

Inhaling or ingesting microscopic asbestos fibers can lead to serious health conditions, such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, decades after exposure. Asbestos is the primary cause of mesothelioma.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that there are asbestos-containing materials in most of the nation's primary, secondary and charter schools.

A 2015 investigative report Senator Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Former Senator Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) commissioned showed that more than two-thirds of 5,309 local education agencies in 15 responding states had schools that contained asbestos.

If a school was built before the 1980s, it likely contains some form of asbestos.



How did you feel when determining how you were exposed to asbestos? Kim Madril | 2:33

How Did Asbestos Get in Schools?

About half of all schools in the U.S. were built between 1950 and 1969 —a time when asbestos was added to virtually every kind of building material to increase durability and fire resistance.

At that time, the general public wasn't aware of the health dangers of asbestos exposure. Products containing asbestos do not pose a threat if left intact and undisturbed. But most of these materials are now deteriorating and can be easily damaged during negligent maintenance work or improper abatement procedures.

“

When I was in the ninth grade, my junior high school was remodeled. I remember huge plastic sheets separating us from areas that contained asbestos. We passed by them every day. Nobody thought anything of it back then.

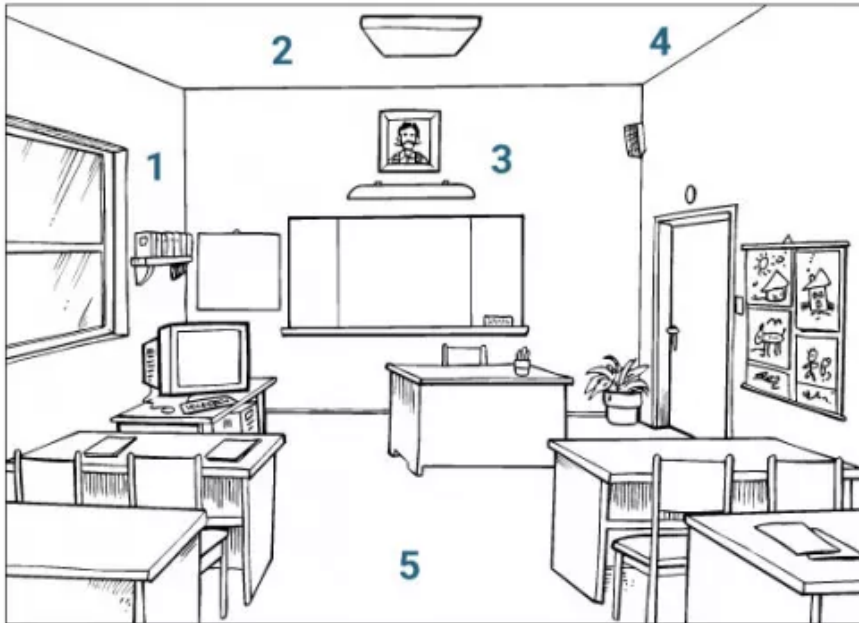
JUDY GOODSON

diagnosed with peritoneal mesothelioma in 2013

Where Was Asbestos Used in Schools?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral once praised for its ability to insulate and fireproof building materials. Until the 1980s, asbestos was added to products used in classrooms, auditoriums, teachers' lounges, school corridors and other high-traffic areas.

Where Does Asbestos Hide in a Classroom?



1. Cement sheets
2. Ceiling tiles
3. Wallboard
4. Textured paint or "popcorn" ceilings
5. Vinyl flooring (including backing and glue)

Materials in schools that may contain asbestos:

- Ceiling tiles
- Vinyl flooring (including backing and glue)
- Wallboard
- Duct work for heating and cooling systems
- Pipe wrap insulation
- Boiler insulation
- Cement sheets
- Textured paint or "popcorn" ceilings



Ceiling tiles like these are common in schools across the U.S.

What Was Done About It?

In 1986, Congress passed the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act (AHERA) to protect students and teachers from asbestos exposure in school buildings.

AHERA requires public school districts and nonprofit private schools to:

- Inspect their buildings for asbestos-containing materials every three years
- Prepare and maintain asbestos management plans
- Designate and train a person to oversee asbestos-related activities
- Perform appropriate response actions to prevent or reduce asbestos hazards

The law rarely requires schools to remove asbestos materials, as long as they remain in good condition. According to the EPA, asbestos-containing products that are managed properly pose “relatively little risk to students and school employees.”

A poorly conducted removal of asbestos materials can actually increase exposure risk. Instead, AHERA encourages schools to ensure that asbestos-containing materials are kept in good condition through a special maintenance plan.

“

I went to a school with exposed asbestos, in the gym, every day. I just hate to think about how many other kids this will happen to who are in schools today. Because it's not at the forefront, there are no abatements going on.

KASIE COLEMAN

diagnosed with peritoneal mesothelioma in 2010

What Is the Current Status of Asbestos in Schools?

A September 2018 report from the EPA's Office of Inspector General shows the agency isn't doing enough to minimize asbestos risks in U.S. schools.

The EPA conducted only 13% of the nationwide AHERA inspections it was responsible for from 2011 through 2015, according to the report.

Half of the agency's 10 regional districts only check for asbestos in a school if they receive a specific complaint.

The EPA is responsible for federal inspections in 29 states, including California, Florida and Michigan. All other states either implement and oversee their asbestos in schools regulations or conduct their own inspections with EPA oversight and enforcement.

A lack of funding to regional AHERA programs and little to no oversight in most of the country increases the risk that asbestos in schools may go unnoticed, potentially leading to dangerous exposure.



This asbestos-containing floor tile was used as a hopscotch game in an elementary school gymnasium.

Students More at Risk Than Teachers

In 2013, research from the U.K. government’s Committee on Carcinogenicity (COC) showed children are more vulnerable to asbestos exposure than adults.

The COC concluded a 5-year-old child’s lifetime risk of developing mesothelioma cancers is approximately five times greater than that of a 30-year-old adult.

An EPA risk assessment study from the early 1980s estimated that 1,000 premature deaths related to asbestos exposure would occur over the next 30 years, with people exposed as schoolchildren accounting for 90% of those deaths.

These findings were a driving force behind the development of mandated asbestos control programs in schools.

“Asbestos exposure risk is higher in children because they are more active, breathe at higher rates and through the mouth, and spend more time closer to the floor where asbestos fibers can accumulate,

EPA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT, 2018



Talking to Your Student's School About Asbestos

As a parent or guardian, you want to know your students are safe when they are at school, and talking to school officials about the school's responsibility, asbestos management plan and financial obligations can help.

Federal regulations do not require schools to remove asbestos materials until the building is demolished. And programs like AHERA don't always ensure students and faculty are safe.

For example, states in the EPA's Region 7 — Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Kansas — only conducted six total asbestos inspections between 2012 and 2016. Some federal jurisdiction states, including Arkansas and New Mexico, performed no inspections during that time.

What Is the School's Responsibility?

The responsibility of a school for dealing with asbestos depends on the state and the school district's responsibility under AHERA. Some states fall under federal jurisdiction, while others implement and manage their own asbestos management programs.

The 2018 Office of Inspector General Report showed that schools in states outside of federal jurisdiction more often inspect and appropriately manage asbestos in schools.

Concerned parents should reach out to school administrators to ensure the school has prepared an asbestos management plan. AHERA requires schools to share these plans with anyone who wishes to see them within five days of the request.

Even school districts that fall outside of AHERA oversight should have asbestos management plans.

You may need to reach out to officials at the school district office to obtain this report.

The asbestos management plan will tell you when the school was last inspected, whether asbestos was found and what plans the school has to manage these materials.

Review the School's Asbestos Management Plan

Under AHERA, the asbestos management plan should document the following:

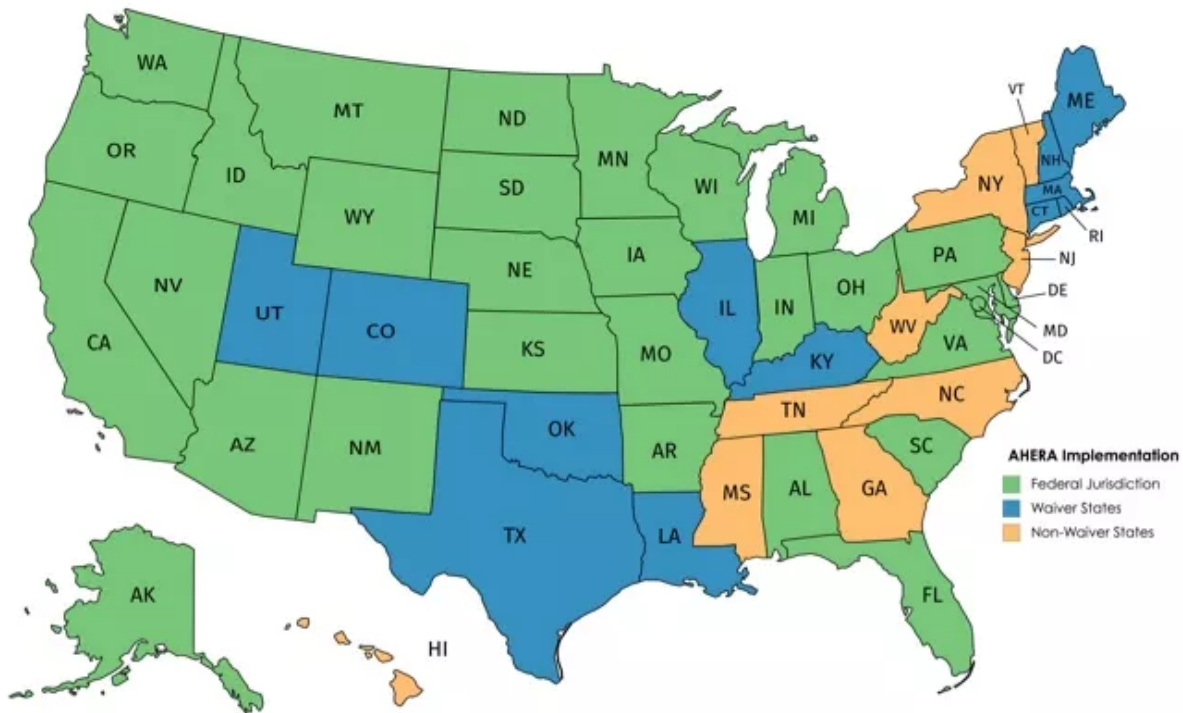
- Contact info of a designated, trained person to oversee asbestos-related activities in the school system
- Inspection protocols, including information of an accredited asbestos inspection and abatement partner
- How the school plans to manage asbestos materials and prevent exposure
- Details of how the school will notify the public about asbestos inspections and the availability of updated management plans
- Records of all asbestos-related activities

The designated asbestos contact person should be able to answer any additional questions you may have.

Federal, Waiver and Non-Waiver States

The EPA is responsible for conducting AHERA compliance inspections for the majority of states.

There are 12 “waiver states” that implement and oversee their own asbestos in schools program and nine “non-wavier states” that conduct their own inspection with EPA oversight and enforcement.



Map showing the AHERA implementation in the United States. There are 29 states under federal jurisdiction, 12 waiver states and nine non-waiver states.

According to the 2018 report from the EPA’s Office of Inspector General, waiver and non-waiver states conducted 87% of their asbestos inspections from 2011 to 2015.

States under federal jurisdiction only performed 13% of required inspections, with an average of 28 inspections in each of the 29 states.

“Our survey results indicated that regional AHERA programs are not well funded and inspection numbers in waiver and non-waiver states significantly outnumber those in federal implementation jurisdictions,” the Office of Inspector General report reads.



Quick Fact

It would cost \$2.2 billion to get all 307 public school facilities in Rhode Island into “ideal” condition. – Jacobs report, 2017

Understanding the Financial Obligations of the School

AHERA was passed in 1986. Federal funding for the legislation dried up in the 1990s, leaving many schools and school districts to implement their own asbestos action plans.

There are 21 states that provide their own inspections. Twelve of those run their own programs, separate from EPA oversight and enforcement. The Office of Inspector General report shows that these states are doing a better job than federal implementation jurisdiction states.

However, any inspection, management or removal of asbestos materials can be extremely costly.

For example, it would cost \$2.2 billion to get all 307 public school facilities in Rhode Island into “ideal” condition — including removing unabated asbestos materials — according to the 2017 Jacobs Recommendations for Consideration, a statewide, independent assessment.

The health and safety of students and staff should be a school’s top priority. But sometimes, financial restraints tie the hands of cash-strapped communities.

Fundraising for key asbestos management or abatement projects can help school districts reach their goals. Call your local superintendent to find out how you can help.



What Happens When Asbestos Is Found in Schools?

AHERA outlines proper methods for dealing with asbestos in schools. States that don’t fall under EPA oversight and enforcement may handle these measures differently.

In general, asbestos action plans will include one or more of the following:

Maintenance

If the identified asbestos materials are in good condition, schools will follow a special maintenance plan to ensure they remain that way. Maintenance efforts should be outlined in a school’s asbestos management plan.

Repair

Maintenance staff may repair damaged pipe or boiler coverings that contain asbestos insulation. These jobs are usually small in nature and involve limited amounts of asbestos

Encapsulation

This involves spraying exposed asbestos materials with a thick, paint-like sealant to prevent fiber release.

Enclosure

Similar to encapsulation, enclosure involves building an airtight barrier around asbestos. This can be built of wood, metal or sheetrock.

Removal

Removing asbestos is the only permanent solution for controlling and preventing future exposure. Asbestos-containing materials are removed and replaced with non-asbestos products.

Encapsulation, enclosure and removal must be done by an accredited asbestos professional. Some repair jobs may require a licensed professional as well.

Asbestos removal from schools is usually a last resort because of high costs and the potential for increased exposure.

Examples of Asbestos Issues in US Schools

-



Chicago

A 2016 EWG Action Fund study showed that students and teachers in nearly 200 Chicago public schools were at risk of asbestos exposure. Only 11 of 184 elementary, middle and high schools identified in an asbestos surveillance update complied with recommendations.

-



Philadelphia

The School District of Philadelphia spent the summer of 2018 inspecting and cleaning up seven elementary schools found to have alarming levels of asbestos fibers. An investigation by the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#) found 10.7 million asbestos fibers in one sixth-grade classroom after a building engineer stripped insulation from a steam pipe, leaving debris on the floor.

-



Hartford, Connecticut

Officials closed the Wish School in Hartford for two days in 2017 after contractors exposed asbestos insulation when removing old lockers from the school.



Manhattan Beach, California

The Manhattan Beach Unified School District was cited with 27 violations in August 2018 for negligent renovations at Mira Costa High School in Los Angeles County. Contractors at the school allegedly disturbed asbestos tiles in the library while students and parents were registering for the school year.

Resources for Parents

The EPA website is a good resource for additional information about asbestos in schools and federal requirements.



Asbestos in Schools FAQs

How do I find out if my child’s school has asbestos in it?

Call your school administrator and request a copy of the school’s asbestos management plan. This report should detail when the last asbestos inspection occurred and if exposed asbestos materials were found. The plan will also designate an asbestos contact person and provide contact information. You may need to reach out to your school district’s main office for this plan.

How do I find out if the school was required to be inspected for asbestos?

First, you should find out when the school was built. If it was constructed before the 1980s, there's high probability that some form of asbestos is within the walls, ceilings or floors of the facility.

Next, find out if your state falls under federal jurisdiction for inspections, or if it is a waiver or non-waiver state. [See the Map] Implementation of AHERA falls to the EPA regional offices. You can contact your school or school district directly to see if inspections are required.

Is it dangerous to have asbestos-containing materials in my school?

Not necessarily. Asbestos is only dangerous when the mineral's tiny fibers are disturbed and released into the air. According to the EPA, as long as asbestos materials are in good condition and properly maintained, they pose "relatively little risk to students and school employees."

However, inspections should identify and evaluate these materials to prevent disturbing the products during renovations or demolitions.

My child's school has asbestos in it. Why aren't they taking it out?

Sometimes, it can be more dangerous to remove asbestos from a building than manage it. According to AHERA guidelines, asbestos removal is necessary only when the material damage is "extensive and severe, and other actions will not control fiber release." Schools typically respond to asbestos by either repairing, encapsulating or enclosing materials.

Reading Time: 14 mins

Last Edited On: 12/06/2023

