

# **HEALTHY SCHOOLS ACTION PLAN:** **ASBESTOS CRISIS IN PHILLY SCHOOLS**

*Submitted by:*

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## BACKGROUND:



For many years the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, through the PFT Health and Welfare Fund (PFTHW) has been conducting independent school assessments, often alongside the District's environmental representatives, and advocating for a much more robust, protective, and proactive approach to addressing dangerously deficient building conditions and environmental hazards in our schools.

The lack of adequate resources, coupled with problems with the way work is too frequently organized, managed and conducted, has often resulted in the presence of dangerous exposure conditions in a variety of settings. This was most recently highlighted by the PFT in response to the asbestos situation at Meredith and Nebinger Elementary Schools.

Too many of the District's older school buildings have multiple “**high-risk**” locations. We are identifying and considering high-risk locations to be those where:

- asbestos-containing building materials (ACBMs) are currently damaged and/or where asbestos debris is present; and/or
- ACBMs, even if currently undamaged, meet three specific criteria:
  1. the material is **highly accessible** to students;
  2. the material is **located where significant student traffic** is present; and
  3. the material is present where **high activity levels** are typical, such as a gym or a lunchroom.

## THE DANGER:

On a daily and routine basis, we are all exposed to some prevailing level of asbestos fibers in buildings or experience some existing level in the outdoor air. While this “background” level of asbestos fibers is something we all must live with, it is also accepted that there is no safe level of exposure below which some disease risk is not present. For that reason, and especially in

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school buildings, it is extremely important that all known sources of asbestos fiber release be completely controlled.

Failure to control or avoid damage to in-place asbestos materials has been shown to result in brief “bursts” of exposure, that when added to the background levels already present, result in unacceptable increases in the potential to cause or trigger the development of asbestos-related diseases. ***The more often such bursts of exposure occur the greater the risk of breathing in asbestos fibers and the greater the risk of illness.***

These “brief bursts” can arise in many ways in addition to direct contact with ACBMs by students and staff. In-place ACBMs often pose a significant potential for consequential damage from water intrusions, such as roof and steam leaks and other sources, as well as from engaging in construction work without properly identifying and controlling asbestos impacts.

### OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

**These locations should not be occupied until all ACBMs have been removed and/or properly enclosed or isolated to ensure the elimination of damage and contact, as well as the potential for even brief “bursts” of exposure.**

In consideration of the highly hazardous nature of asbestos exposures in Philadelphia school environments, PFTHW is recommending the following set of actions be immediately implemented aimed at minimizing and limiting occupant contact with ACBMs and with airborne asbestos exposures:

#### **ACTION ITEM 1: ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION**

Along with PFTHW and the Philly Healthy Schools Initiative, the District should immediately undertake a joint identification and review plan and process to comprehensively describe the up-to-date and current status of ACBMs in all schools. This process must start with an evaluation of the location, condition, and amounts of all ACBMs in the “high-risk” locations as previously described.

#### **ACTION ITEM 2: HIGH-RISK LOCATION IDENTIFICATION**

Develop an agreed-upon list of high-risk location types and then specifically identify schools with high-risk locations to be



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addressed. A list of the specific schools and High-Risk locations in those schools must be created.

Additionally, any summary created should also include a listing of:

- *schools without any ACBMs; and*
- *schools that do not have ACBMs in any staff/student occupied areas of the building.*

### **ACTION ITEM 3: URGENT SHORT-TERM RESPONSE**

Develop an urgent/immediate response plan as an interim measure to repair and stabilize the ACBMs in all high-risk locations. This action item should be focused on:

- *immediately cleaning up any existing contamination;*
- *minimizing the potential for asbestos fiber releases by effectively controlling access to ACBMs; and*
- *implementing proper work practices and procedures and properly maintaining the ACBM in good condition until it can be removed.*

This effort will be developed in combination with long-term permanent measures aimed at removing all ACBMs from these locations as promptly as possible

### **ACTION ITEM 4: OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE (O&M)**

Develop and implement an expanded and more effective set of O&M standards and approaches aimed at ensuring increased awareness, “real-time” inspection and reporting of existing problems and conditions by building engineering and custodial staff, and ensuring their ability to conduct appropriate HEPA-vacuums and cleaning as an interim measure to repair and stabilize the ACBMs in all high-risk locations.

**This effort will be developed in combination with long-term, permanent measures aimed at removing all ACBMs from these locations as promptly as possible.**

### **ACTION ITEM 5: LONG-TERM ABATEMENT**

Planning, priority setting, and solution implementation approaches must be developed and implemented as quickly as possible to ensure that all ACBMs are removed from high-risk locations.