

Take a Walking Tour for Safety

MOST OF US are in schools every day. We look at the children, the teachers, the books...but how often do we stare at the walls? Not often enough, according to the people who know facilities best. The physical setting in which children learn is one of the most important factors for their achievement and their safety.

It's been 10 years since the nation's General Accounting Office put a \$112 billion price tag on a fix for America's schools and it's over double that today.* Crumbling walls, moldy ceilings and inadequate storage are threatening education at least as much as teacher shortages or low motivation.

Whether schools are new or old, posh or poor, there are criteria by which we can judge them. And often, there are simple things that can be done immediately to make them safer and better places to learn.

So take a walking tour. Consider this checklist and help your school community prioritize its facility needs:

- √ **Space**—The #1 factor for safety in school facilities is space. When classrooms have less than 45 square feet per child, hands on science becomes a dangerous game of knees and elbows. (Adding an aide makes the situation worse, not better!) When classrooms are crowded, teachers should split the group for labs and get some extra help to supervise part of the class in the library or on the playground.
- √ **Ventilation**—Years ago, there was a myth that closing up windows would make schools warmer and keep students on task. We know now that natural light is much better for learning than fluorescent lights, and that all classrooms need at least five air

changes per hour. That makes most rooms a little cool in the winter, so bring a sweater. It's healthier.

- √ **Exits**—Every room should have two clear exits. One might be a big window that has no screen.
- √ **Water**—Students need hot and cold running water and antibacterial soap. Drinking water helps brains as well as bodies. If there's no hot water in a room, a small under-counter RV heater works well at minimal cost.
- √ **Safety equipment**—Check that fire extinguisher. Is the tag current?

Once you've identified what's missing, check out what's there. Some things teachers love can be dangerous:

- √ Classroom mammals and turtles are notorious sources of infection. Rabbits and guinea pigs have a dander that irritates many allergic children, too.
- √ Too much paper or clutter—not just a fire hazard but a barrier to escape in emergency. Buy that teacher a key-chain drive.
- √ Stock bottles of chemicals—there should never be enough of a chemical stored in a classroom to poison a child, and *every* chemical (including cleaning supplies) should have complete MSDS safety information nearby.

Tired of walking? Grab a paper and pen, and create your own list of quick fixes to make your school safer and more scientific.

—Juliana Texley, Ph.D.

* <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1995/he95061.pdf>