



Transcript: Tools for Schools
Interview with Kenny Foscue, Epidemiologist/Health Educator,
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Narrator: Indoor environmental quality in schools is a major public health issue, not only in Connecticut, but nationwide. A healthy school is linked to a better learning environment for children, better performance by teachers and school staff, and a sense of comfort, health and well-being for everybody in the school. I'm here today with Kenny Foscue to talk about the Connecticut Department of Public Tools for Schools Program.

Hi Kenny, can you tell us a little bit about the Tools for Schools Program?

Kenny: Yes, it's a great program the EPA came up with about 20 years ago to address indoor air problems in schools. It kind of addresses two big issues that, in terms of trying to deal with this issue there's no indoor air standards and most schools have budget problems, so they came up with this innovative idea, it's a team-based program. A major reason for doing this, especially in Connecticut, and a major reason our department and other departments are interested in this, is addressing the asthma epidemic by reducing asthma triggers in schools. To do that, it revolves around a kit, they have a nice kit, but the main thing is it's a team-based program. So in every school, we have a team made up of an administrator, a teacher, a school nurse, head custodian and a parent. And we really want kids from the high schools and middle schools to be part of these teams, too, because it's a great learning experience and they can be helpful. So these teams, we train these teams, I'll say more about that in a second, to assess the problem, IAQ (indoor air quality) problems in the buildings by surveying the staff, collating the information, conducting walk-throughs through the school and prioritizing their findings and making recommendations to the school administration and doing follow-up. And a lot of the recommendations are what we call "low hanging fruit", or low- or no-cost remedies, that make a whole lot of difference. And as I said, we have a very active training program and provide on-site training for school districts. And not just DPH, but a consortium of 24 agencies and organizations, have been working on this for the past 13 years and our goal is to have this in every school in every district. And at this point, over 860 schools and about 155 districts have implemented the program, Tools for Schools. And I should say that there's a state law that mandates that all schools have an indoor air program and this fulfills it, that law, and we think this is the best way and we provide assistance.

Narrator: What are some of the environmental hazards that can exist in a school?

Kenny: Well, you might not know this right off, most people think about mold, but the main hazard that we see every day, and that schools are dealing with, is basically dirt and dust. These are just buildup of dirt and dust, from, a lot of it is due to cutbacks in the maintenance budget. When there's a budget problem, the first thing gets cut is maintenance and a lot of school districts have lost custodial

staff. I should say that dirt and dust are lung irritants and they can cause asthma attacks, so they're an important trigger to deal with. So it's very important that the staff and students help keep the schools clean and reduce clutter, we see that a lot.

A big issue that you hear about a lot is mold and the problem with moisture. We definitely suggest that schools fix the moisture problem. Don't worry about testing. If you have it (mold), we don't care what kind of species it is, just deal with the moisture issue and kill and remove the mold.

Obviously, a big thing that people are aware of are ventilation problems: not enough fresh air; the HVAC systems, heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems are not working adequately; or there's not a ventilation system at all, we see that a lot in the older schools; and maybe the vents are blocked and things like that.

Another area is cleaning chemicals and Connecticut has a great, fairly new green cleaning law. You have to use approved green cleaning chemicals. And part of this, it's very important for staff and parents to abide by the law by not bringing in cleaners, disinfectants and deodorizers. And so we train the team to help get the word out and make sure that people don't do that.

Another area is vehicle idling fumes, it used to be bus fumes. We've done a lot of good things about stopping buses from idling, but people should know that there's a state law that says that nobody should be idling more than three minutes, especially not around schools. And there are other outside sources, like pollen.

Another thing that we see a lot, and schools have been really trying to deal with, is old carpets in elementary classrooms, especially in the lower grades. They're basically reservoirs for mold and dirt, and they can't be cleaned well, and so we really encourage them to remove those.

Narrator: And how does Tools for Schools help to make our schools healthier?

Kenny: Well, the main thing is by regularly assessing, at least on a yearly basis, maybe more often, assessing what's going on in the buildings, making recommendations, it's especially important to educate the staff about what they can do and to be part of the solution and not be part of the problem, and most importantly by reducing asthma triggers, that is a high priority as you've heard me say. School nurses can spot and document health complaints and work with the teams to identify the problems. A big thing is keeping small problems from becoming big problems by encouraging the staff to report these problems earlier rather than later. Like, it's better to fix a roof leak before you have a massive mold problem. And it's also very important for parents and staff to make sure their district has implemented Tools for Schools. I think we're down to the last 12 districts that have not, and especially now, maintaining the program, and so we're working to go back and provide refresher training for school districts.

Narrator: So what can parents do to make sure that Tools for Schools is in their school and is implemented?

Kenny: Well, you can first go to our map, our Tools for Schools map. It's at www.ct.gov/dph/schools, plural, or you can call us at (860) 509-7740. But take a look at the map. But just because it's on the map, you should still be asking what's the status of the teams, when's the last time they were trained, and maybe they can even volunteer as parents to be on the team.

Narrator: Great! Thanks, Kenny! For more information about our Tools for Schools Program, please visit our website at www.ct.gov/dph/schools or call (860) 509-7740.

It's National Public Health Week. Remember, public health is ROI: Return on Investment. Save Lives, Save Money.