

Creating a Healthy School Environment by Improving Indoor Air Quality

Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School - Oakland, CA

2013

WHY FOCUS ON IMPROVING INDOOR AIR QUALITY?

At Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary (MLK), almost one third of students have asthma, placing indoor air quality at the top of the school Wellness Champion's to-do list.

ACTION STEPS

MLK's Wellness Champion started her indoor air quality work during the 2012-2013 school year by meeting with school staff, including the principal and custodian, to educate them on the simple steps the school could take to improve indoor air quality and increase students' health. With guidance from the district, the

MLK Wellness Champion conducted a staff survey and completed a school walk-through, identifying problem areas with asthma triggers, such as classrooms with blocked ventilation, incorrect thermostat settings, and air fresheners and chemical cleaners. Staff addressed problem areas by cleaning air vents and clearing blockages, creating and posting signage with ventilation setting tips, resetting classroom thermostats, and replacing chemical cleaners and sprays with mild products such as baking soda. MLK's Principal appreciated that small steps could make a difference, describing that the school was "missing out on doing simple things to improve the air quality. We know better now so we do better."

DEMOGRAPHICS

- K-5th grade
- 284 students
- 89% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals

Ethnicity:

- 63% African American
- 14% Hispanic/Latino
- 9% White
- 8% Asian
- 6% Other

CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

For MLK's wellness initiative, limited time has been the biggest hurdle. The Wellness



Champion—also the school nurse—is very busy seeing students throughout the day, so making time to focus on monitoring classrooms for asthma triggers or checking in with teachers to see if they are following the recommendations can be challenging. In an effort to sustain the work and address indoor air quality in a time-efficient manner, the school is considering an annual staff reminder training as well as teacher information packets that highlight simple solutions for maximizing air quality in the classroom.

IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

One of the biggest impacts of MLK's indoor air quality improvement process has been increased awareness of the issue. MLK's Wellness Champion noted that, "Now staff know that having good air quality is important, and they understand what they should do in their classroom to make sure the air is good." In addition to increasing awareness, MLK received a clean air award from California Breathing, a program of the State Health Department, to purchase classroom items and special cleaning products to help maintain good indoor air quality. The Wellness Champion's efforts are also helping to inform parents of potential asthma triggers in the home as well as the asthma resources available to families. Most importantly, the changes are impacting student health—students with asthma have higher attendance rates this year as compared to last year.

"Many changes are cheap and easy to make but we need a person to monitor and keep awareness up. Having the nurse do wellness is great."

MLK Principal

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

MLK's Wellness Champion suggests that gaining the principal's support for an air quality improvement project is crucial to creating teacher and staff buy-in. Teachers are exceptionally busy, so asking them to focus on ventilation and room setup can feel challenging if not framed as integral to the school's mission. Educating teachers about the impact of poor indoor air quality on student learning and performance helps teachers see the value in taking the time to move classroom furniture, unblock vents, or check the thermostat for the correct settings. From the principal's perspective, the Wellness Champion has been key to the success of MLK's indoor air quality efforts—having a staff member provide leadership and take time to monitor classrooms and identify potential problem areas ensures student health while allowing teachers to focus on teaching.

For More Information:

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