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HVAC industry labor-management partners take action against school ventilation dangers in the fight against COVID-19

An estimated one-third of schools across the United States are operating antiquated ventilation systems, putting students and staff at risk, not only of infection but of other major health issues, according to a recent study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

The study, “School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacement,” is the first study of school infrastructure since 1996. It has been welcomed with open arms by the Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA), who have been working together for many years on highlighting the importance of well-maintained HVAC systems in schools.

“Up until this year, HVAC has been continuously out of sight, out of mind; no matter how many times we have tried to educate the public on the importance of better ventilation in schools,” California SMART Local 104’s political director Rob Stoker explains. “COVID-19 has brought with it a greater understanding about the importance of HVAC systems beyond feeling warm or cold. It has put ventilation to the fore as people are beginning to understand how good ventilation systems have the ability to remove airborne contaminations.”

Up until this year, lack of school funding was one of the challenges that resulted in many school districts turning a blind eye to the harmful effects of poor ventilation. However, things are about to change in some parts of the country.

In September, Governor Newsom signed into law the California Assembly Bill (AB) 841, which directs state energy efficiency funding to upgrade heating, air conditioning, and ventilation (HVAC) systems in public schools, prioritizing schools in underserved communities and those near freeways or industrial facilities.

Stoker, alongside Duane Davies, CEO/chairman National Air Balance Company (NABCO) and president of California’s SMACNA Chapter; National Energy Management Institute’s (NEMI) Chris Ruch; and the team at University of California – Davis, were heavily involved in the development of the Bill. They say it is a major step forward toward healthier schools as it will provide up to \$600 million for Public School Ventilation Work.

Chris Ruch, NEMI Director of Training who is on the ASHRAE epidemic taskforce for schools, can now breathe a sigh of relief. For many years he, alongside SMART and SMACNA, has been working to prepare and promote a white paper called “Proposed Ventilation and Energy Efficiency Verification/Repair Program for School Reopening” in an attempt to highlight this important issue.

Getting the message out has been a struggle, but the paper is gaining traction as a result of the pandemic and greater awareness. However, Ruch says, “Even if COVID-19 gets solved tomorrow, it is still highly relevant.”

Over on the East Coast in New York State, just like in California, the pandemic has highlighted the need to update ventilation in schools. However, New York State officials have yet to investigate this even after a reported 46 teachers from nine schools in Queens, the Bronx, and Manhattan filed a complaint with the New York State Department of Labor, asking authorities to investigate ventilation across city schools.

Despite this roadblock, SMACNA contractors and SMART local unions and craftspersons are taking matters into their own hands, educating school districts on the importance of testing and maintaining their HVAC systems.

Josh Monahan, Vice-President of SMACNA contractor J.E. Monahan Metals, Inc. in Queensbury, New York, is a Capital District SMACNA officer leading the charge, advocating for the changes that need to be done.

He and his team of Local 83 craftspersons are currently involved in Phase 3 of the \$180-million Albany High School project to retrofit the existing HVAC system. “The sheet metal industry will continue to be a big part of safety discussions in schools beyond COVID-19,” he says. “More studies are showing how poor ventilation not only has major health impacts, but can be detrimental to a pupil’s performance. We will continue to work closely with everyone in the industry to better educate and advocate for the safety of students and staff.”

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The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) have a labor-management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org.