

TEACHING IN A SAFE CLASSROOM:

A Health and Safety Tip Sheet for Teachers and Paraeducators



Whether you are a teacher or paraeducator, you have a strong commitment to the well-being and academic success of your students. Taking care of your own health and safety at work helps you meet these goals by avoiding injuries and illnesses that could mean time away from work.

A little planning will go a long way toward making your work environment safer. These three steps will help you get started:

1. Identify job hazards
2. Work towards solutions
3. Follow up and share your successes

Step 1. Identify job hazards

The chart on the following pages lists many of the common hazards that affect teachers and paraeducators. Use this chart to identify the hazards relevant to your work. Talk to your co-workers to find out if they have similar concerns. Report any hazards to your supervisor.

Step 2. Work towards solutions

The chart also offers tips for reducing hazards. Develop a plan to implement the changes that are needed. Some suggestions:

- Assess what changes you can make on your own, and what you need your employer or supervisor to do.
- When possible, work together with your school's site safety coordinator, union, and co-workers.
- Share your ideas with your supervisor.
- Workplace hazards can be reduced or eliminated by: (1) removing the hazard (preferable); (2) instituting policies and procedures that reduce the hazard; and/or (3) using personal protective equipment.
- Find out if there are laws that support the change you need.

* Did you know?

- School employees as a whole have a higher rate of work-related injuries and illnesses than do other California workers.
- Teachers have higher rates of respiratory infections than other workers.
- Common health problems linked to teaching include slips and falls, infectious disease, musculoskeletal injuries, and violent assaults.

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Common Job Hazards and Safety Tips for Teachers and Paraeducators

Slip and Fall Hazards

The most common accidents in schools are slips, trips, and falls. These injuries can be caused by slippery or uneven walking surfaces. Here are some tips to prevent slips and falls:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you need to reach high places, never stand on a chair or desk. Use a ladder or footstool, or ask a custodian for help. • Keep classrooms free of clutter. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure shelves and storage racks are stable and secured. • Wear shoes with non-skid soles. • Be aware of caution signs for maintenance and construction projects. |
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Ergonomic Hazards

These are caused by poor job design that results in sprains, strains, and other wear and tear on the body. Ergonomic hazards include: lifting heavy objects, bending to help students, staying on your feet for long periods of time, or moving students with physical disabilities.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you work on a computer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Position the chair and desk so that your knees and forearms are at 90 degree angles, with wrists straight and feet flat on the floor or on a footrest. - The top of your screen should be at or just below eye level, and 16-22 inches away. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid using chairs or other furniture designed for children. • Ask for help when lifting students, heavy objects or moving equipment. • Obtain the SASH ergonomics fact sheet for additional practical tips. |
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Infectious Disease

You could be exposed to many different viruses and bacteria, such as the common cold, flu, HIV, and Hepatitis B. Remember that some diseases common in children are more dangerous to adults.

If you are a paraeducator, you may be exposed to bodily fluids while helping children use the toilet.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash your hands frequently, and encourage your students to do the same. • Teach students to cover their mouths when they cough or sneeze. • Stay home if you're sick! • If you provide first aid to students, you may need a Hepatitis B vaccine and bloodborne pathogens training. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you may come into contact with blood or other bodily fluids: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - wear disposable gloves; - wash your hands with soap and water; and - disinfect any equipment or work areas that are affected. |
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Violence and Aggressive Student Behavior

About three-quarters of all public schools experience one or more violent incidents of crime every year; almost half report thefts. Teachers and school staff have some of the highest rates of workplace assault. Special education teachers and paraeducators may be at particular risk of dealing with student behavioral issues, such as biting and hitting.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to maintenance staff any locks and alarms that are not working. • Set up a communication system if you're working alone at night or when school is out. Use a buddy system. Notify administrators if you are working late. • Check with administration on the reporting process for violent incidents and threats • Put your personal belongings in a secure place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure the school requires parents and visitors to sign in at the main office. • Advocate for workplace violence training for all school staff. • Obtain the SASH emergencies fact sheet for additional practical tips. • Work with the district to develop and implement safety procedures and training programs on handling student behavioral problems.
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Stress

High stakes exams, overcrowded classrooms, disruptive students, angry parents, and budget cuts can all cause stress. Ignoring stress can result in health symptoms that can lead to hypertension or heart disease.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a list of what is causing stress at work and think about ways to reduce these problems. Start by selecting one or two issues to work on so you don't feel overwhelmed. • Talk to co-workers and friends about your issues. • Find some time to relax each day. Having 20 minutes or so of quiet time helps relieve stress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to get regular exercise. • Eat a well-balanced, healthy diet. 
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Poor Indoor Air Quality

Poor air quality can contribute to respiratory problems and voice disorders. A lack of fresh air, poor ventilation, molds, and bacteria can all reduce air quality in schools. Portables or relocatable buildings made with pressed wood may release formaldehyde.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open doors and windows to get fresh air. • Verify that the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system is working. The HVAC system should be inspected annually. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report water leaks or signs of dampness right away.
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Chemicals

Many types of chemicals are used in the classroom, such as cleaning products, pesticides, and, in older buildings, asbestos in flooring or ceiling tiles.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find out what types of chemicals are present in the school. • If you use chemicals in your class: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use the least toxic chemical you can. - Make sure all chemicals are labeled. If you put chemicals into a different container, label the new container. - Obtain a Data Safety Sheet (SDS)* for each product. - Ask for chemicals training. - Ventilate your classroom. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call maintenance if there is a possibility of lead or asbestos exposure. Lead can be found on painted surfaces and can be disturbed during repairs. Asbestos could be found in spray-on insulation, ceiling tiles, flooring or pipe insulation and is only a hazard if it is disturbed. • To reduce the need for pesticides, make sure classrooms are cleaned well after eating or drinking, and have any cracks and crevices in the classroom repaired. • Ask for chemicals training. Be familiar with the emergency plan in case of a chemical accident. • If you teach vocational education programs or classes such as wood shop, industrial arts, or metal shop, you may need additional training on chemical, machinery, electrical, noise, and fire hazards. |
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***What is an SDS?** An SDS is a Safety Data Sheet prepared by the manufacturer of a chemical or product. It provides detailed information about a chemical, such as how to protect yourself (including the use of gloves, respirators, or other protective gear), how to store the chemical, and what to do in an emergency. Your supervisor must provide the SDS on request.



Step 3. Follow up and share your successes

Once you've identified the hazards and solutions, follow up to make sure the changes are implemented. Contact your district's or school's site safety coordinator for help or suggestions. Share your successes with your co-workers and your supervisor.

School Site Safety Coordinator

The person in charge of health and safety at your school is:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

District Resource

The person in charge of health and safety at your district is:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Reporting Injuries and Illnesses

It is important to report work-related injuries and illnesses. You cannot be discriminated against or punished for doing so. If you have a work-related injury or illness, contact:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

To learn more....

Go to the SASH website at www.dir.ca.gov/CHSWC/SASH and click on Hazards by Occupation. Or call 510-642-5507.

* Safety Pays

Although resources are limited in school districts, some solutions do not require extra money.

Preventing injuries can actually SAVE lives and SAVE money by:

- reducing workers' compensation claims;
- avoiding loss in productivity when injuries occur; and
- improving employee morale!