

OPINION COLUMNS

Opinion: The air inside Colorado schools needs to be cleaned up

Better ventilation and filtering can help reduce smoke from the outside, Covid-19 on the inside

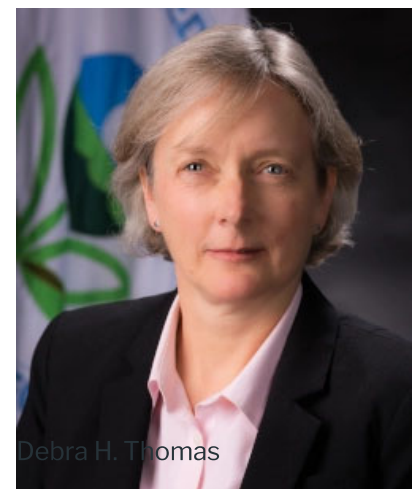
Debra H. Thomas 1:30 AM MST on Nov 20, 2021



In the West, summers have become long and hot. What we used to call wildfire season has now become a year-round phenomenon. Even though the kids are back in school, we are still seeing wildfire affecting our Colorado communities.

I've lived and worked in Colorado for many years. In my position as U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 acting regional administrator, I know all too well the health effects of smokier skies. We know that instances of wildfire smoke, often combined with extreme heat, will only increase in the coming years due to climate change.

We also understand that most of us spend about



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90% of our time indoors, and poor outdoor air conditions can exacerbate poor air quality



indoors. Combined with the current challenge of COVID-19, providing safe air spaces for children to learn, play and gather is more important now than ever.

We know the effects of poor air quality on our bodies: itchy eyes, sore throats, wheezing and coughing; and in children, an increase in childhood respiratory diseases, including asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia.

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Children often are more vulnerable to pollutants than are adults, and childhood exposure can cause irreversible damage during important periods of growth and development. Smoky days can result in lost school days.

As I reflect on the responsibility that we at EPA have to the public and that we as community members have to each other, I draw inspiration from the work of our partners here in Colorado.

One example is the undertaking by Colorado Springs School District 11 to ensure the highest possible indoor air quality in its schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In 2020, the District assessed its 4 million square-foot facility inventory to identify and repair all heating, ventilation and air conditioning, or HVAC, systems.



District 11 is putting \$32.68 million in federal and state grant funding to use on projects such as the complete renovation of HVAC systems at

Columbia and Bristol Elementary Schools, and at Michell and Palmer High Schools. These upgrades will improve filtration, ventilation and temperature controls.

Properly maintained HVAC systems deliver cleaner air to the classrooms, cafeterias and auditoriums, where children spend their days. Historically, District 11 replaced HVAC air filters twice a year; now staff replaces air filters three times a year. These renovations and more frequent air filter replacements demonstrate an active commitment to maintaining good indoor air quality for all students and staff.

Furthermore, increased ventilation and HVAC filter changes can help reduce airborne contaminants, including viruses, when used properly in a building. EPA commends District 11 for the work and willingness to share its approaches with other districts and public agencies.

I also draw inspiration from the work that we and our partners are doing together. Soon after the pandemic began, EPA developed a new [Healthy Indoor Environments in Schools webinar series](#) featuring the best ventilation and cleaning practices, intended to help school staff in responding to concerns in their facilities. The latest episode on asthma-friendly schools is now available as an [on-demand webinar](#).

Likewise, we are partnering with the U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Department of Education on an [Efficient and Healthy Schools campaign](#) to engage K-12 schools, especially those serving low-income student populations, on ways to reduce energy costs and improve both energy performance and indoor air quality. The campaign will help identify practical HVAC solutions and upgrades that improve energy efficiency and create healthier spaces for teaching and learning.

Healthy indoor air in schools depends on all of us working together, and there are ways you can help. If you're a parent or school staff member, get involved and let your school and district know that safe indoor air is

important to you.

Administrators and community members — like those at Colorado Springs District 11 — can help make significant indoor air quality improvements through deliberate coordination and planning. If you're a school official, represent an organization that supports schools or are an individual interested in participating in the Efficient and Healthy Schools campaign, we invite you to [sign up](#) as a participant or a supporter. For those

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interested in learning more about protecting and maintaining healthy indoor environments, visit our [website](#).

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