

# Painting Schools

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Some areas of your school may be off-limits without permission from your teacher or principal, and some projects should be done with at least one partner. Check with your teacher before beginning any activities or projects related to this fact sheet.

## Why It Matters

During a paint job, old lead paint, which is bad for your health, can be uncovered and get into the air. New paint doesn't contain lead, but many paints do release chemicals that can make people sick. And when paints are disposed of improperly, they pollute local waters and harm fish.

Have you ever walked into a room and wrinkled your nose at the odor of paint? If so, you probably smelled volatile organic compounds (VOCs), substances in the paint that can evaporate into the air. Many materials release VOCs, but paint is one of the worst offenders. Paint often contains other harmful chemicals, too, as well as heavy metals.

Fumes from VOCs and other substances in paint can irritate your eyes, nose, throat or skin, or cause headaches, dizziness or nausea. Some substances in paint can cause kidney or liver damage. Others can cause cancer.

Paint used to be even more dangerous because it contained lead, which can cause many health problems, including memory loss, learning difficulties and cancer. Lead has been banned from new paint since 1978, but if your school was built before then, it might have old layers of lead paint. When walls or ceilings are scraped to prepare for a new coat of paint, this older lead paint can be exposed. If painters are not careful, lead dust or paint chips can escape into the air.



In addition, chemicals and metals from paints wind up in the environment when paint is disposed of improperly. Many people dump paint down the drain. This sends the paint into streams and rivers, where it harms plants and wildlife. Leftover paint can also leak out of cans that are sent to landfills.

## What Kids Can Do

You have to be in school, but paint fumes don't. Below are steps your school should follow to keep paint from making you sick or hurting the environment. Learn what's important, then pay attention to how paint is used in your school. Let your teacher, your principal and your parents know if paint is being used in ways that could harm your health or cause pollution. And if you see dust in the air during a paint job, assume the dust contains lead. Stay away, and notify your teacher or principal immediately.

## What Your School Can Do

For advice on what to look for — and look out for — when buying, using or disposing of paint, check out <http://www.greenseal.org/> which offers a detailed brochure. The National Paint & Coatings Association: <http://www.paintinfo.org/> also has advice on using paint safely.

- **Notify students and parents before painting starts and explain what steps will be taken to protect students' health:** Before a paint job begins, school officials should tell you and your family what part of the school is being painted, how long they think it will take and how they'll protect your health, including following the steps below.
- **Test for old lead paint before beginning a new paint job:** Lead was banned from paint in 1978, but it's possible that some lead paint was still in use even after that. So if your school was built before 1985, the school should test for old lead paint (it may be hiding under the paint you can see) before starting a new paint job. If old paint contains lead, your school should take extra precautions to keep lead dust away from kids and kids away from lead dust.
- **Use safer paints:** Many companies make paints with few or no volatile organic chemicals. In general, low-odor paints emit fewer VOCs, while quick-drying or glossy paints emit higher levels. Water-based (latex) paints are a safer choice than oil-based (alkyd) paints, because they don't have as many dangerous chemicals (including VOCs).
- **Paint only when necessary:** Some schools paint on regular schedules. They shouldn't. Your school should get a fresh coat of paint only when it's necessary — when the old paint can no longer be cleaned, for instance.
- **Paint when school is not in session:** Painting should take place on weekends or during vacations.
- **Ventilate any room that is being painted:** Areas being painted must be well ventilated during the painting and afterwards, so fumes don't build up. This is particularly important if the paint contains VOCs. Your school should leave plenty of time for the building to air out before kids come back in. Students shouldn't be allowed back into a room if it's still possible to smell paint fumes.
- **Reuse paint:** After a paint job, leftovers don't need to go to waste. They can be mixed together to make a primer or base coat for later paint jobs. Or the mixture can be used in closets or other areas where the color is not important. But water- and oil-based paints should never be combined.
- **Dispose of paint properly:** Leftover paint should never be dumped down a drain or thrown in the garbage. The best way to get rid of it is at a site that accepts hazardous waste. Before workers dispose of paints, they should know the rules in your area. If they're not sure, the place to check is the local sanitation department, which can tell them how and where to get rid of paint safely.

Check out the **Project Ideas** fact sheet for examples of activities that you can do in your school. All of these projects can go toward earning the Green Flag Award at your school.

The Green Squad is a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in collaboration with the Healthy Schools Network. <http://www.nrdc.org/greensquad/> © Natural Resources Defense Council

