Strategies for Asthma Relief

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, asthma attacks interfere with daily school activities and account for 14 million lost school days each year. Children with asthma need proper support at school to help them keep their asthma under control so they can fully participate. So what can principals do?

You can begin by asking yourself the following questions provided by the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP), National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute:

- Is your school smoke-free?
- Does the school maintain good indoor air quality?
- Is there a plan or policy to control or eliminate allergens and irritants that can make asthma worse? (e.g., pets with fur or feathers; mold; dust mites in carpets and upholstery; and strong fumes from pesticides, paint, perfumes, and cleaning chemicals.)
- Is there a school nurse in your school every day?
- Can children carry their own asthma medications?
- Does your school have an emergency plan for taking care of a child with a severe asthma attack?
- Has your staff received instruction about asthma and how it is treated?
- Have your students been taught about asthma and how to help a classmate who has asthma?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, you may need to revise and strengthen your asthma control policy. Responding to the needs of students with chronic conditions such as asthma in the school setting requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and systematic approach. According to NAEPP, asthma-friendly schools should have policies and procedures that include:

- A system for confidentially identifying students with chronic conditions and reviewing their health records. This system would allow school staff to identify existing asthma needs, resources for meeting those needs, and potential barriers.
- Meetings with teachers and parents to discuss accommodations and educational aids and services that the asthmatic student may need.
- Clear roles and obligations of school staff, especially those who interact with asthmatic students on a regular basis.
- Assurance that students with asthma can take their medication when needed and have access to those medications at all times during the day.
- Appropriate health education for students with and without asthma. Integrate asthma awareness and lung health lessons into the health curriculum.
- A full-time certified school nurse, who would maintain the school’s student asthma action plans and educate other school personnel.
- A coordinated effort with local community programs.
- A comprehensive asthma management plan.

Reducing environmental “triggers” in the school’s internal environment, combined with asthma awareness and proper medical management, can prevent most asthma attacks. Good communication between principal, parents, physicians, and school staff are essential for a successful asthma prevention effort.

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Environmental factors. Principals should ensure that students and staff work in a smoke-free environment and that all applicable state laws and regulations are strictly enforced. Improving indoor air quality (IAQ) at schools can help reduce or eliminate asthma triggers. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that approximately 10,000 schools have used the agency’s Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools Kit (www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/asthma/iaq-1.htm) to assess their IAQ needs and guide inexpensive improvements, including routine cleaning and maintenance, quickly drying wet spots, and adopting integrated pest management techniques.

Benefits of a Coordinated School Health Approach

Schools cannot manage asthma by themselves. That’s why a coordinated school health approach and a multidisciplinary school health team are so important. This team can engage educators and health staff, involve parents and community members, and focus school energy on policies and practices that support the overall health of students and staff.

Parents are a key part of the team, communicating directly with the school nurse and giving permission to the nurse to discuss asthma management with students’ personal physicians. The coordinated school health team also can locate community resources, such as hospitals, health care organizations, and asthma organizations, which can provide additional asthma education materials and programs. Some of these organizations even run asthma camps for kids.

Once you have a better understanding of asthma, how to prevent or reduce the episodes of breathing difficulties, and how to respond when symptoms arise, you can implement policies and practices that will make your school “asthma-friendly” for otherwise healthy students who are ready and willing to learn.