

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

BLOG SERIES **1000**
HOURS A YEAR
PROTECT WHERE CHILDREN LEARN

Busting the myths about radon

By Andrew Ellsworth, Vice President of Health and Learning, Green Building Alliance

It's October and schools are in full swing. With our community in our local school buildings on a daily basis, the 1000 Hours a Year team wants to ensure that all schools are healthy and safe places for students to learn and staff to work. We are excited to provide technical assistance, training and mini-grants to help schools and early learning centers address lead and radon issues in their facilities.

Through our blog, we plan on digging into these topics a little more deeply. First up, let's talk about radon, and separate the myths from the realities.

1. Radon is only something to be concerned with in homes.

FALSE. Radon is a naturally occurring soil gas that is present everywhere. All buildings are susceptible to radon on floors near or in contact with the ground.

2. We don't need to test for radon because our building doesn't have basement classrooms.

FALSE. Even buildings that don't have basements but are built with concrete slabs-on-grade or over a crawl space can still have high levels of radon. Testing should be conducted in all rooms that are above crawl spaces or unoccupied rooms that are in contact with the ground.

3. Radon testing is expensive.

FALSE. Radon testing certainly costs money, but the cost of testing per classroom is often around \$30-40. The 1000 Hours a Year Project is offering mini-grants to help cover the cost of radon testing, and mitigation if that is necessary.

4. We shouldn't test, because if radon is found, the school has to be evacuated.

DEPENDS. The threshold for what the US EPA considers elevated radon is four picocuries per cubic liter (pCi/L). EPA strongly recommends evacuation at 100 pCi/L. Levels above four should be addressed promptly, but evacuation is not warranted. Besides, if your school did have a level anywhere near 100 pCi/L, wouldn't you want to know?

5. Radon testing should take place over the summer while students aren't in the building.

FALSE. Summer is actually the wrong time to test for radon, as levels are typically at their lowest, people open windows, and schools turn off their ventilation systems. To get more accurate readings, testing should be conducted during the heating season, such as late fall or winter. Testing should also occur on normal school days, not weekends or holidays, and the building should operate as normal.

6. Radon can cause lung cancer.

TRUE. Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S., second only to smoking, and is responsible for 21,000 deaths annually.

7. Adults and children exposed to cigarette smoke are at greater risk for radon.

TRUE. Smokers who live in homes with elevated radon are at double the risk of lung cancer as a result of the combined exposures.

8. Radon is radioactive.

TRUE. Radon is part of a decay chain of uranium, and exists for about four days before it decays into other unstable elements. The decay process releases radiation, which is what can cause cell mutation if the decay happens while in your lungs.

Radon is a health risk, but it is completely manageable. Take advantage of our technical and financial support this fall to help eliminate this risk in your school and help keep students, teachers, and staff safe and healthy.