

# Animals in the Schools: Guidelines for Reducing Exposure to Allergens

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## Background:

Asthma can be a leading cause of school absences. It is not unusual for students with poorly controlled asthma to miss more than 10 school days per year due to asthma; children with poorly controlled severe asthma may miss more than 30 days during a school year. Time lost from school negatively affects grades, academic achievement, self-esteem, and future life successes.<sup>1</sup> There is a high prevalence of asthma and other allergy-related conditions among students in the MPS. The national average is 7.5% (CDC 1999) and in MPS, the prevalence is 12.1% (Annual Health Information form 2002).

The United States Environmental Protection Agency has published a special document related to asthma in the schools that includes the following statements:

- Fur-bearing and warm-blooded animals including gerbils, birds, cats, dogs, mice and rats may trigger or exacerbate asthma episodes.
- Proteins which act as allergens in the dander, urine, or saliva of these warm-blooded animals may sensitize individuals and can cause allergic reactions or trigger asthma episodes. If an animal is present in the school, there is a possibility of direct, daily exposure to the animal's dander and bodily fluids.
- Even after extensive cleaning, animal allergen levels may stay in the indoor environment for several months after the animal is removed.
- The most effective method to controlling exposure to animal allergens in schools is to keep schools free of feathered or furred animals.

## Purpose of guidelines:

The purpose of having established guidelines for the presence of animals in schools is:

- 1) to decrease student exposure to potentially harmful allergens,
- 2) to inform staff regarding precautions and necessary conditions regarding animals,
- 3) to provide a basic minimum standard district-wide (individual schools could add more restrictions according to the needs of their building staff/students), and
- 4) to provide a document for communication with parents and families regarding animals in the schools.

## Guidelines development:

A committee was formed to review all locally available published guidelines and to develop recommendations for MPS guidelines regarding animals in the schools (2000). Input was received from the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support, and the Minnesota Department of Health. The draft guidelines were reviewed and discussed with multi-disciplinary school staff and health care providers. Reviewers included Hennepin County Community Health Department, MPS Environmental Health and Safety, and the Healthy Learner's Board's (HLB) Asthma Clinical Advisory Committee and the HLB Asthma Planning Group. Additional meetings were held with middle school and elementary science teachers, and with staff at Teacher and Instructional Services who are responsible for science curriculum development. The final draft was reviewed and approved by Allen Giles, District Legal Counsel.

These guidelines are intended as recommendations, not policy, and are based on current knowledge and studies of the relationship of animal exposure to asthma. These guidelines are not intended to mandate compliance but rather to suggest ways of handling a complex issue involving students, staff, and families.

## Additional Resources:

Several other school districts have addressed the issue of animals in the schools by developing either policies or guidelines. Rochester Public Schools has implemented a very detailed set of guidelines<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the MPS guidelines, the Rochester guidelines can be utilized by school staff in drafting more comprehensive restrictions related to individual schools.

<sup>1</sup> Pediatric Asthma: Promoting Best Practice, Guide for Managing Asthma in Children. American Academy of Allergy , Asthma & Immunology.

Prepared by the Academic Services Consortium, University of Rochester, (Rochester, New York) 1999

<sup>2</sup>Managing Asthma in the School Environment. United States Environmental Protection Agency. EPA 402-K-00-003 April 2000

<sup>3</sup>Guidelines for Having Animals in the School Setting. Health Facts. October 1999. Olmsted County Public Health Services

## Animals in the Schools: Recommendations

The following recommendations are being made concerning the presence of animals in schools. These guidelines represent a minimum standard of care. For optimal student health it is recommended that these guidelines be used to develop specific site-based guidelines for your school.

### I. Exclusions:

- Fur-bearing and warm-blooded animals, especially cats and dogs, are triggers for many students with asthma and allergies<sup>1,2,3</sup>. Therefore, guidelines recommend that cats or dogs not be allowed in any MPS school building with the exception of assistive animals such as seeing-eye dogs.
- Because other fur-bearing and warm-blooded animals also cause problems for students with asthma and other allergies, it is also recommended that no fur-bearing animals should reside for any length of time in classrooms but only visit briefly.
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### **For those schools that choose to continue to have animals residing or visiting in classrooms, the following guidelines apply:**

### II. Sanitation:

- Handwashing with soap and water is mandatory for school staff after handling animals, cage debris, or animal supplies.
- Students should never be allowed to clean up any excretory waste from the animals or handle clean cages or equipment used by animals.
- The area for cleaning cages and all animal care equipment must be maintained completely separate from any food preparation, food storage, or eating area for students.
- Staff will use a 1:10 solution of (1) bleach and (10) water for all clean up of excretory waste products and other cage cleaning. Use bleach solution only after all students are out of the room/building.
- Urine from rodents is a trigger for many students with asthma/allergies. Student exposure should be limited and then only in line with policies stated in Communication section.

### III. Indoor Air Quality

- Locate animals away from supply and return vents to avoid circulating allergens throughout the room or building.
- The areas near where the animals are housed must be kept sanitary and clean to minimize pollutants becoming airborne. Locate animal cages on hard surface floor (not on carpet).

### IV. Containment:

- Use safe and appropriate cages for all animals visiting the classroom. Animals should not be allowed to roam around either the classroom or school building; animals such as rabbits can leave droppings on the carpet.
- Teacher or classroom supervisor **MUST** be present when animals are taken out of a cage and handled by students.
- Immediately remove any animal that displays aggressive behavior.

### V. Communication:

- All parents need to be informed in advance of any animals visiting or living in their child's classroom. Many students have allergies/asthma that could be worsened by exposure to animals. If any parent objects to the presence of animals in their child's classroom, the animal must be removed from the classroom, not the student. Each building should have a plan for who will inform the parents, e.g., teacher, principal, or health office staff.

### VI. Animal Health:

- Animals must be in good health and have appropriate up-to-date immunizations and examinations by a veterinarian.
- No animals should be left residing in classrooms over release days or vacation breaks.

<sup>1</sup> Managing Asthma in the School Environment. United States Environmental Protection Agency. EPA 402-K-00-003 April 2000

<sup>2</sup> Tovey E., and Marks G. Methods and effectiveness of environmental control. Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology. February 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Guidelines for Having Animals in the School Setting. Health Facts. October 1999. Olmsted County Public Health Services.