

Clean air in the new school allergy guidance is welcome. Now make it law.

On 6 July 2026 the Department for Education quietly rewrote the rules on classroom air. Buried inside new statutory guidance on allergy safety in schools, introduced after Benedict's Law, the campaign led by the family of Benedict Blythe following his death from anaphylaxis at school in 2021, is a sentence that campaigners have been fighting years to see in an official document. Ventilation, air quality monitoring and HEPA filtration are now described as essential elements of asthma control, sitting inside schools' legal health and safety duties.

It's a genuine step forward, and credit belongs to the families and campaigners who spent years pushing the evidence in front of officials while schools turned away parents who wanted to pay for their own air cleaners. Clinically Vulnerable Families, Safe Air Schools, the National Allergy Strategy Group and the Ella Roberta Family Foundation are among those who made this happen.

But read the guidance closely and the gaps are obvious. It says clean air is essential. It doesn't say who pays for it, who checks it's happening, or what happens to a school that ignores it. And it is written, like most of this debate, as though a school is a building full of children and nobody else. It isn't. Teachers, teaching assistants, cleaners, caterers, site staff, SEND support workers, volunteers and the parents and grandparents who come through the gates every day all breathe the same air, in the same rooms, for years at a time. For the Hazards Campaign, that gap is the whole story. Good intentions in a guidance document are not the same as an enforceable right to breathe safely at school, and history shows that without funded inspection and real penalties, guidance is the first thing to be quietly dropped when budgets tighten.

This isn't a niche issue

Asthma is the most common long term health condition in children in the UK. Roughly one in eleven children lives with it, meaning most classrooms have several affected pupils. Hospital admissions for children spike every year within weeks of the autumn return to school, as disrupted inhaler routines meet a fresh mix of triggers indoors. A national review of child asthma deaths found that every single child who died had been living in an area breaching World Health Organization air pollution limits, and that children in the most deprived communities in England were four times more likely to die of an asthma attack than those in the least deprived.

Dirty indoor air is not just a trigger for attacks. Evidence from cohort studies also links sustained exposure to traffic related air pollution with slower development of children's working memory and attention, and short-term pollution spikes with worse GCSE results among students with respiratory conditions. Whatever a child's starting point, breathing polluted air at school appears to work against them twice over. Once through their lungs, and again through their ability to concentrate and learn.

An equality issue as much as a health one

None of this falls evenly. Research across London has found that schools in the most polluted areas are heavily concentrated in the most deprived neighbourhoods, and that children from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds are exposed to significantly higher pollution levels throughout childhood. Nationally, emergency admissions for childhood

asthma are far more common among children in deprived areas than affluent ones, and that gap has been widening, not closing. A guidance document that quietly encourages better ventilation where possible will do most for schools that already have the money and the buildings to act, and least for the schools serving the children most at risk.

This is exactly the pattern the Hazards Campaign has long identified in workplace health and safety. As income falls, risk rises, and the people least able to complain or opt out are the ones left most exposed. Children don't get to choose their school's boiler, ventilation system or postcode. If clean air is only ever a recommendation, it will end up distributed the way most privileges are.

It's a workplace, not just a classroom

This is where the Hazards Campaign's usual territory meets this issue directly. A school is a workplace for hundreds of thousands of people, and the same air quality problems that harm children's lungs and concentration don't stop at the staffroom door. Teachers and support staff spend entire careers in the same poorly ventilated rooms. Site staff, cleaners and catering teams often work in the oldest, least ventilated parts of a building, kitchens, boiler rooms, storerooms, for the longest hours. Teaching assistants and SEND support staff frequently work in closest, most sustained contact with children who are themselves vulnerable to respiratory illness, multiplying their own exposure. And a great many adults with their own asthma, allergies or other lung conditions work in schools, or come into them regularly as governors, volunteers, contractors or family members, without ever being mentioned in a document framed solely around pupils.

Current guidance is silent on all of them. That is a significant omission, not a minor one. Health and safety law has never treated "the people harmed" as limited to one group in a building. The Health and Safety at Work Act exists precisely because employers owe a duty to everyone affected by their activities, not just the people they consider the priority on the day. Any legislation or statutory guidance on school air quality that names pupils but leaves staff, support staff, contractors and visiting family members unrecognised is only doing half the job it needs to do, and it leaves school employers with room to treat clean air as a pupil welfare add on rather than a workplace duty, they owe to everyone on site.

What "essential" should mean

Recognising clean air as core to asthma control is the right call scientifically. Leaving it as guidance, rather than a funded and enforceable duty covering everyone who works in or uses a school, is not good enough. To turn this into something pupils, staff and families can rely on, we think government needs to go further.

Recognise the whole school community in law, full stop. Any statutory footing for clean air in schools must explicitly cover staff, support staff, contractors and the wider community who use the site, not just pupils. Teachers, teaching assistants, cleaners, catering and site staff have as much right to a safe workplace as any other employee, and that right shouldn't have to be inferred from general health and safety law when it could simply be written in.

Fund it properly. Guidance that assumes schools will find money for CO2 monitors and HEPA filtration from existing budgets will produce exactly the postcode lottery the evidence already shows. Ring fenced capital funding for ventilation and filtration, prioritised for schools in the most polluted and most deprived areas, should follow the guidance, and should be costed against the whole school population, not just pupil numbers.

Inspect it, don't just publish it. Health and safety regulation only changes behaviour when it is checked. Ofsted and the Health and Safety Executive should be explicitly resourced to assess indoor air quality as part of routine school inspection, covering staffrooms, kitchens, site offices and support spaces as much as classrooms, not left to react only after someone has been harmed.

Make refusal to act a breach, not a choice. Where a school knowingly fails to address poor ventilation or monitored air quality breaches, that should carry the same enforceable consequences as any other failure to meet a statutory health and safety duty, enforceable by staff and their trade unions as employees, not only by parents on behalf of their children.

Educate everyone, not just publish a policy template. Many staff still think air filtration was a pandemic era extra rather than a routine part of managing chronic lung conditions, their own included. Training for all staff, recognised safety reps with a role in air quality, and a clear right for parents, carers and staff alike to ask what monitoring and filtration is in place, should be as standard as fire drills.

Track it nationally. The government does not currently publish comprehensive data on school level air quality or ventilation standards. Without that data, nobody can hold any school, local authority or government to account for whether "essential" measures are in place for pupils or for the workforce that spends its working life in the same rooms.

Prevention, not just recognition

The Hazards Campaign's case for the wider world of work has always been the same. Strong laws, strict enforcement and active participation by the people affected are what change outcomes, not warm words about good practice. The same logic applies to school air, and it applies to everyone who spends their day inside a school building, not only the pupils sitting at the desks. Recognising clean air as essential is a genuine and hard-won victory. But essential things need funding, inspection and consequences, and they need to name everyone they are meant to protect. Otherwise "essential" is just a word in a PDF that some schools will meet and many will not, for some of the people in the building and not for others.

Every child, every teacher, every teaching assistant, every cleaner and caterer and site worker, and every parent, grandparent or volunteer who walks through the gates, in every part of the country, deserves air that doesn't make them ill or hold back their work and their learning. That shouldn't depend on which school they happen to attend, or which role they happen to hold within it.

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