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Health and Human Services Agency  
Public Health Division

2751 Napa Valley Corporate Drive  
Building B  
Napa, CA 94558  
[www.countyofnapa.org](http://www.countyofnapa.org)

**Mary Butler**  
Interim Agency Director

## Decisions on School Dismissal Due to Unhealthy Air Quality

Extended periods of unhealthy air quality due to wildfire smoke, and the corresponding impact on students and families, has required school districts throughout the Bay Area to weigh the risks and benefits of keeping children in the classroom. Children, the elderly and those with respiratory conditions such as asthma, lung disease and heart disease are most at risk for harmful impacts from unhealthy air quality and are considered sensitive groups.

Public Health Departments provide recommendations and guidance on air quality-related health concerns, but individual school districts make the final decision regarding school dismissal or closure. When considering whether to dismiss students due to unhealthy air quality, Public Health recommends school districts consider the following:

- There is no established Air Quality Index cut-off level for school dismissals or closures.
- There is no clear evidence that children are safer from wildfire smoke at home than at school. Air quality in homes is likely to be similar to that in schools.
- Schools provide a safe place where recommendations for children to avoid outdoor exertion can be enforced and monitored.
- School closures often require a working parent to stay home, and not all families have the same ability to meet this need. Unsupervised children may not adhere to health recommendations.
- Schools can support parents who choose to keep children at home due to health concerns.
- The number of students that must walk or bike to/from school varies by school site and may need to be considered in messaging around reducing exposure when school is in session.

The CDC and the EPA have created [Air Quality and Outdoor Activity Guidance](#) for Schools.

Specific strategies for individual schools may include:

- Keeping doors and windows closed and sealing large gaps as much as possible;
- Checking and changing air filters (heating and cooling systems) and setting systems to recycle indoor air.
- Modifying school schedules to accept early arrivals into an indoor space, keeping students indoors during lunch and recess periods, and keeping students indoors during after school programs;
- Canceling and/or rescheduling sports practices and games;
- Encouraging students with asthma to follow their action plans and keep their quick-relief medicine close at hand;
- Supporting parents in their decisions to continue to keep children at home.

Reference: Wildfire Smoke: A Guide for Public Health Officials, May 2016

