



# clean space

With a lack of consistent state and federal environmental regulations for schools and child care centers, programs like The Heinz Endowments–funded 1000 Hours a Year are providing guidance and resources to make learning spaces safer and healthier. By Joyce Gannon | Illustrations by Donna Grethen









# Since Growing Garden Child Care Center in Tarentum opened its doors seven years ago, owner and director Heather Wells has aimed to create a green and environmentally safe space for the children and teens who attend its before- and after-school programs and summer camps.

---

Students at the center, which is about 21 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, remove their shoes when they enter the facility to reduce tracked-in dirt and pollutants. The staff stocks non-toxic soaps and cleaning products. Paints are checked for harmful chemical ingredients. Students drink from BPA-free water bottles, and arts-and-crafts supplies are frequently recycled for future use.

Ms. Wells, raised in West Deer Township, not far from Tarentum, considers herself “a country girl” who was taught to respect the environment and that “you don’t waste.”

Naturally, she was intrigued when she learned about 1000 Hours a Year, an initiative funded by The Heinz Endowments that works to eliminate environmental hazards in early learning centers and schools in 10 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Launched in 2017, 1000 Hours was created through a partnership of Pittsburgh nonprofits Women for a Healthy Environment and the Green Building Alliance. The Endowments has awarded nearly \$800,000 to the initiative. 1000 Hours uses the funds to provide mini-grants to schools and centers to cover costs of assessments for air quality, lead

and radon exposures, and remediations to infrastructure and equipment to bring them into safe compliance levels.

Exposure to lead, radon, and other toxins and pollutants can affect children’s neurological development and aggravate allergies, asthma and other conditions. A priority of 1000 Hours is outreach to schools and centers in low-income and minority neighborhoods where aging buildings and housing stock can put children at a disproportionate risk for exposure.

“We’re focusing on environmental justice and a holistic approach for addressing environmental health,” said Michelle Naccarati-Chapki, executive director of Women for a Healthy Environment. Schools and learning centers were eager to participate in 1000 Hours because its launch came in the wake of a devastating crisis in Flint, Michigan, where elevated lead levels were discovered in that city’s water supply, she explained.

“Children spend a minimum 1,000 hours a year in school buildings or at early childhood centers,” said Jenna Cramer, executive director of the Green Building Alliance. “Those are places that impact children’s health. But often exposures [to environmental hazards] aren’t front of mind or can be overwhelming or scary for schools and centers to address.”

1000 Hours “gives schools and learning centers more agency,” she added. “It’s not just a big awareness campaign on lead and radon ... with the mini-grants, we made it impactful. We bring in the people to test, remediate and hold your hand through this really big process.”

“It lowers the entry point for schools and centers to do something about it.”

### FILLING THE POLICY GAPS

1000 Hours a Year is just one of several programs in the Pittsburgh region aimed at making buildings healthier environments in local communities. Among the different initiatives supported by the Endowments and other Pittsburgh foundations are the Women for a Healthy Environment’s Healthy Homes programs, which assess lead exposure, mold and radon, and distribute cleaning kits and other resources to make homes safer for children and families, and the Green Building Alliance’s Green & Healthy Schools Academy, which provides programming and opportunities for students and staff to engage in green and sustainable initiatives in schools.

These programs and others are helping to fill significant gaps in making schools and early-learning centers safer environments for children since there are no federal mandates to test schools and child care centers for lead or radon, and regulations among states vary widely.

Pennsylvania is among those that don’t require radon testing for schools, and while the state requires schools to test for lead in drinking water, there are no mandates for remediation.

“Pennsylvania falls short on passing policies that protect school building occupants,” Ms. Naccarati-Chapkis said.

An August 2021 report from Women for a Healthy Environment found that nearly 90 percent of 65 school districts surveyed statewide tested drinking water in the last decade. Of those, 91 percent found lead contamination in their drinking water but only 9 percent conducted remediation. The survey also found that 20 percent of schools tested for radon. Among those, 38 percent found hazardous levels but only 40 percent followed up with remediation.

The survey conducted by Women for a Healthy Environment represented only 13 percent of the state’s approximately 500 school districts. But it concluded that testing and cleanup practices were inconsistent, and that districts that didn’t follow up with remediations were constrained by a lack of funds and resources. Also, districts with higher percentages

of low-income and special education students were less likely to conduct tests, the report said.

Pittsburgh City Council is considering a bill that would require regular lead safety assessments for older rental properties that have children present, which would include day care facilities as well as homes and would call for steps to be taken to reduce the threats from the neurotoxin. These would include installing filters in city-owned drinking and cooking facilities and encouraging the use of filters in all schools and child-occupied spaces.

A handful of bills introduced in the Pennsylvania Legislature would strengthen mandates for environmental testing, including one that would establish a lead abatement grant program and an abatement assistance fund. Another, co-sponsored by state Rep. Austin Davis of McKeesport, southeast of Pittsburgh, would require medical providers to inform parents about the dangers of lead, encourage testing for small children, and require the state Department of Health

### Healthy Learning

**1000 Hours a Year helps provide child care centers and schools with indoor environmental resources such as water filters and air purifiers that reduce dust, dirt and other airborne contaminants.**



to keep a database of blood tests and conduct awareness campaigns about lead poisoning.

Mr. Davis represents many Mon Valley towns south of Pittsburgh where older schools and housing stock can be sources of lead paint chips, dust and other harmful pollutants.

“We have high rates of blight, and lead in paint and soil becomes more prevalent,” he said.

Enacting more legislation for testing and remediation of hazardous substances “is huge because we need to make sure our kids are healthy and give them the best start in life possible,” he said.

### LEARNING IN HEALTHIER SPACES

To date, the Women for a Healthy Environment’s 1000 Hours program has performed assessments and remediations for more than 200 schools and early learning centers in the Pittsburgh region. From 2017 to 2019, the organization provided testing and remediation in 40 percent of public school districts in Allegheny County.

Growing Garden is among the educational centers that have benefited from the initiative.

A spring 2021 assessment found the center to be “really high in compliance” in categories such as non-toxic learning materials, floor textures and cleaning products, Ms. Wells said.

Tests for lead in water found levels within state and federal compliance guidelines but higher than what 1000 Hours recommended as safe.

“They wanted levels at zero,” Ms. Wells said.

1000 Hours provided funds to purchase a water filter used for drinking water stored in the center’s refrigerator and covered the costs of installing lead filters in two sinks. It also provided the center with two air purifiers that reduce dust, dirt and other airborne contaminants.

Housed in a century-old building in a once-thriving industrial town along the Allegheny River, Growing Garden sits a couple of blocks from railroad tracks and less than two miles from a steel mill. Those factors add up to environmental challenges and “a lot of dust and dirt,” Ms. Wells said.

Besides helping to eliminate toxins and musty smells in the center, the purifiers have added extra protection for students and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participation in the 1000 Hours program also has become a real-time learning tool for Growing Garden’s 17 enrolled students, Ms. Wells added. They better understand why it’s important to drink filtered water “and now they get why they take their shoes off when they come in the door,” she said.

Also benefiting from the initiative is the Woodland Hills School District, which comprises some of Pittsburgh’s east-

ern suburban communities.

Assessments by 1000 Hours resulted in recommendations to install lead filters and individual bottle fillers at water fountains in the district’s six school buildings.

When schools reopened after state-mandated closures during the pandemic, “we pushed even harder to get [the water stations] in place,” said Robert Finney, the district’s director of facilities.

### Healthy Living

**Healthy Homes programs developed by Women for a Healthy Environment assess lead exposure, mold and radon, and distribute cleaning kits and other resources to make homes safer for children and families.**

The assessments also found high lead levels in pipes that service the high school cafeteria.

Lead filters were installed and kitchen faucets replaced during high school renovations completed this past summer.

“It puts everyone’s minds at ease to know we’ve been tested,” Mr. Finney said. “It’s positive for our staff and for the kids who will take over when we’re no longer here.”

Women for a Healthy Environment is planning for that next generation. Using data it collects about schools and early learning centers through 1000 Hours, the organization is formulating proposals for future state legislation that would





require radon and lead testing and follow-up remediations at schools, Ms. Naccarati-Chapkis said.

“With aging school buildings in Pennsylvania, we have environmental hazards,” she said. “We have to make an investment in them, and we believe the time is now. We know when we have healthy buildings, we have children who achieve greater academic performance.”

## EXTENDING AN ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY

Endowments support of the 1000 Hours initiative is part of the foundation’s long history of working to reduce environmental risks for children and families. In 1990, Teresa Heinz, now chair emerita of the philanthropy, co-founded the Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning.

“Mrs. Heinz really embraced that body of work,” said Andrew McElwaine, the Endowments’ vice president for Sustainability. “She has a passionate interest in the impacts of the environment on women and children.”

Over the past 20 years, the alliance broadened its mission to become the Alliance for Healthy Homes and later merged with the Columbia, Maryland-based National Center for Healthy Housing. Among other organizations engaged in environmental advocacy for children and families that have been supported by the Endowments are Get the Lead Out, Pittsburgh, the Community Justice Project, Pittsburgh United and Conservation Consultants Inc. (CCI), a nonprofit that conducted energy-efficiency assessments at homes.

“Mrs. Heinz was ahead of her time, working to get the resources needed to be certain that lead abatement was part of that service at CCI in the early 1990s,” Mr. McElwaine said.

CCI merged in 2020 with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, which provides home rehabs and works to remove environmental hazards in residential properties.

Beginning in 1995, Mrs. Heinz sponsored a series of free summits that focused on women’s relationship to health and environmental issues and attracted thousands of attendees, eventually leading to the formation of the Women for a Healthy Environment organization as a way to more deeply and consistently educate and involve women in issues that impact their health and environment. In 2006, the Endowments funded a report by Rand Corp. and the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development that assessed lead level screenings and reporting procedures for children in Allegheny County.

## Healthy Legacy

Energy efficiency has been among the efforts supported by The Heinz Endowments through groups like Conservation Consultants — today merged with Building Together Pittsburgh — to make homes more environmentally sustainable for families.



That report recommended “more diligent state and local involvement” in the process.

Eight years later, the Endowments staff revisited the report’s recommendations and helped spur the eventual creation of Lead Safe Allegheny, said Phil Johnson, the Endowments’ Environment & Health senior program director. The coalition includes government agencies, community and nonprofit organizations, health care providers, and others who work to make housing and other properties lead-safe and lead-free.

“The neat thing about public health is that when exposures can be eliminated, you’ve eliminated the problem,” Dr. Johnson said. “Not many fields have a formula that’s so clear and present.”

“The Heinz Endowments was lucky to have the work and vision that Mrs. Heinz created decades ago . . . We are a region where there are really strong non-government organizations and community leaders who wake up and do this work every day. And there’s still a lot of work to do . . . We hope that as a region, we’ll place more emphasis and priority collectively on how children are going about their lives and what protections they have.”

And Dr. Johnson called the 1000 Hours initiative and other efforts by Women for a Healthy Environment and Green Building Alliance on behalf of children and families “flagship work . . . and really impressive platforms that any city would be proud to have.” **h**