

## Action Steps for Administration Officials

- Establish a mercury policy for your school. Change school purchasing policies to ensure that mercury-free products are purchased whenever possible. As schools replace mercury-containing equipment or purchase products that contain less mercury, they reduce the chances of a spill and its consequences.
- Where possible, replace mercury-containing devices with mercury-free alternatives. (Refer to “Facility-Wide Inventory of Mercury and Mercury-Containing Devices,” for suggestions.)
- Assemble a team to conduct an inventory of mercury sources in the school. A school-based team might include representatives from buildings and grounds, the school nurse’s office, science classrooms, your school’s Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), your Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and your school’s health and safety committee.
- An inventory tool has been developed as part of this series for your use. When conducting an inventory, make a special effort to search for containers of liquid mercury. They may have been used for demonstrations and might be found in science classrooms or storerooms. Use the results of the inventory to set priorities for proper disposal/recycling and prompt replacement of mercury items most vulnerable to breaking and spilling.
- Support the development of a mercury spill response plan. While not required, a spill response plan might fit well as an appendix to your school’s building-level emergency plan. Make sure school staff know their role and whom to contact in the event of a spill. Your response plan should include elements that deal with roles and responsibilities, staff training, personal protective equipment, evacuation, ventilation, ways to prevent tracking, contamination, decontamination, spill reporting, disposal/recycling and parental notification. Even a few drops of mercury need to be cleaned up properly.
- Never use a vacuum cleaner, mop or broom to clean up a mercury spill!** Heat from the vacuum’s motor will increase the amount of mercury vapor in the air. Mops and brooms will spread the mercury, making proper cleanup more difficult and costly. The vacuum cleaner, mop and broom will become contaminated and require disposal as hazardous waste.
- Prevent spills by storing items in secure locations until the items can be properly disposed of or recycled. Make sure mercury-containing products are well protected against breakage. Place guards over gymnasium lights. Double bag any item containing liquid mercury by placing it in two plastic bags, one inside the other. Securely tape each plastic bag closed and place the item in a covered, non-breakable container such as a plastic bucket. Label the container “Mercury-Containing Devices” and store it in a locked cabinet or room until disposed of or recycled.
- Learn about proper disposal/recycling of mercury-containing products and cost-effective options. (Schools should NOT throw them out in the trash!) Clothing and other items directly contaminated by mercury must be disposed of as hazardous waste. Elemental mercury and mercury-containing items may be brought to a recycler or included in household hazardous waste collection days if allowed by the sponsoring municipality. If this is not allowed, schools qualify for reduced regulations when these mercury devices are recycled as long as the school generates less than 220 pounds of hazardous waste per month (known as Conditionally Exempt Small Quantity Generators, or CESQGs). (Refer to “Disposal and Recycling Options for Mercury and Mercury-Containing Devices” for more information.)
- Help raise awareness about mercury safety. Teach your students in science class or in an assembly about the importance of mercury safety. Consider a mercury awareness program for your next annual Right-to-Know session. Include mercury safety as a discussion topic at a PTA meeting.



## Contact names and numbers

### For health questions or to get more brochures:

New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH)  
(800) 458-1158 or e-mail at [ceheduc@health.state.ny.us](mailto:ceheduc@health.state.ny.us)  
<http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/environ/hsees/mercury/index.htm>

### For questions about recycling and disposal:

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC)  
Division of Solid and Hazardous Materials  
(518) 402-8633  
NYSDEC Small Quantity Generator Helpline  
(800) 462-6553  
[www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov)

### To report a spill:

NYSDEC Spill Cleanup and Reporting Hotline  
(800) 457-7362

### For additional information:

NYSDEC Division of Environmental Permits, Pollution Prevention Unit  
(518) 402-9469  
[www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov)

### In New York City:

To report a mercury spill in a NYC Public School or to get more information about mercury, call the Department of Education Office of Environmental Health and Safety at (718) 361-3808.

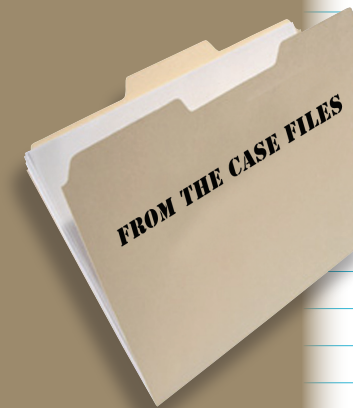
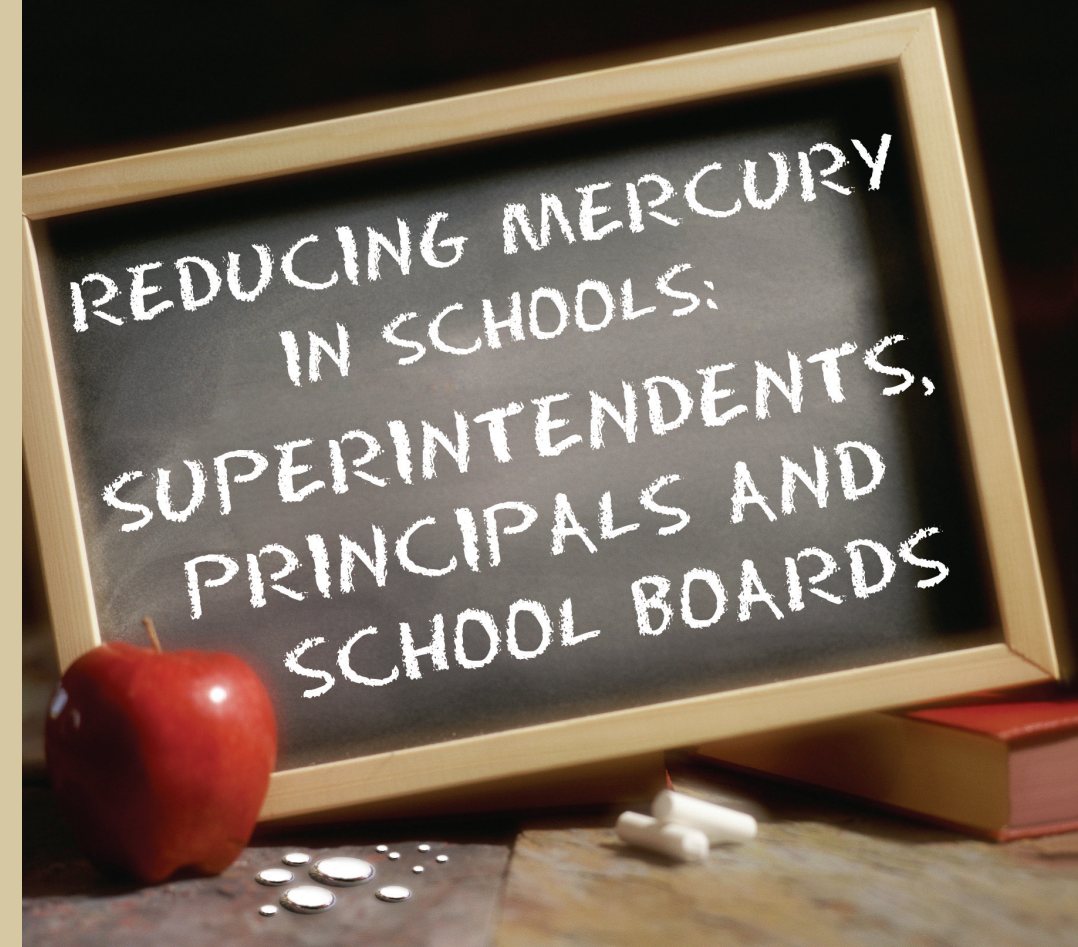
To report a mercury spill in a private NYC school call 3-1-1 and ask to be connected to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) HazMat.

### Acknowledgements:

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### NOTE:

*These brochures are intended to provide information and lessons learned. They are not intended to replace school district requirements for training and personal protective equipment.*



## This is a true story. It could happen in your school or your community.

One Tuesday morning, the thermometer part of a scientific instrument broke during an eighth grade science class. Without the substitute teacher’s knowledge, the students played with the mercury beads by flicking them around the room...



...The students told their science teacher the next day, who then reported the spill to school administration. School staff found beads of mercury in the classroom and evacuated about 225 people from the area. Officials notified the local health department and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. In addition to the cost incurred, a school contractor needed two-and-a-half days to clean up all the mercury and conduct final air sampling. School officials notified parents by mail about the incident the day before it was reported by local news media.

New York State Hazardous Substances Emergency Events Surveillance (HSEES) database, US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR).

**School superintendents, principals, and school board members share the responsibility for not only educating students but also for maintaining occupant safety. The enclosed materials will assist you in protecting your school from the expense, inconvenience, and health hazards associated with mercury spills. Mercury spills can be very costly; more importantly, they can be prevented! Ask your staff to identify mercury sources now, before a spill occurs. Dispose of as many sources of elemental mercury as possible. Develop and review spill cleanup procedures with appropriate staff.**

**Reducing mercury in schools is an important goal for school boards, principals, superintendents, science teachers, buildings and grounds personnel, health and safety committees, school nurses, parents and students. This brochure will help you find mercury sources in your school and avoid potential spills.**

## What is Mercury?

Mercury is an element that occurs naturally in the earth's surface. The form of mercury that poses an exposure concern in schools is known as elemental mercury, or simply, mercury. Mercury is a silvery, liquid metal that releases mercury vapor into the indoor air at room temperature. It is fascinating to children because it easily breaks up into many smaller droplets.

Mercury is a concern for human health and for the environment. It does not degrade and is not destroyed by burning, which is why proper disposal and recycling are essential.

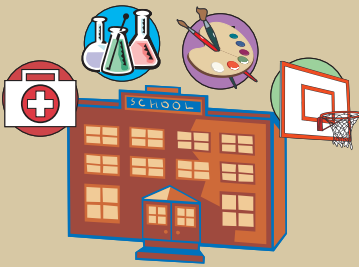
## Mercury Exposure is a Health Concern

Spilled liquid mercury is a health concern. The central nervous system is probably the most sensitive target organ for mercury vapor exposure. Mercury vapors can affect different areas of the brain, resulting in a variety of symptoms. Some symptoms from exposure to high levels of mercury vapor, or from long-term exposure to low levels, can include memory loss, headache, sleeplessness, irritability and tremors. Short-term exposure to high levels can also cause coughing, shortness of breath, chest pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, high blood pressure and skin rashes. Young children's exposure to mercury is of particular concern because their nervous systems are still developing.

Exposure to elemental mercury can occur by breathing mercury vapors, eating or swallowing contaminated food or drinks, or having skin contact with liquid mercury. After a spill, the primary health concern is from breathing in mercury vapors. Since mercury vapor is colorless and odorless, people are not aware that the indoor air contains mercury or that they are breathing mercury vapor. The exposure can last a long time if the spill is not properly cleaned up. Just a few drops of mercury can produce harmful vapor levels in enclosed spaces such as rooms or vehicles.

## Mercury Sources in Schools

Instruments containing mercury can be found virtually anywhere on school property – in the nurse's office, science rooms, gymnasiums, art rooms and boiler rooms. Liquid mercury is used in instruments that measure temperature (thermometers), pressure (barometers or sphygmomanometers), humidity (hygrometers), vacuum (laboratory manometers), flow (water meters) and air speed (anemometers). Mercury can also be found in lights (particularly gymnasium and fluorescent lights), thermostats, heating/ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, plumbing systems, cafeteria equipment, medical devices, regulators, gauges and science room equipment.



Sometimes children or adults who are unaware of the hazard bring mercury into schools as a novelty, for demonstrations or as part of cultural rituals. Contractors, guest speakers, parents, staff or students might bring mercury-containing devices into the school.

The State Health Department recommends that containers of elemental mercury identified by staff or found during an inventory be given the highest priority for removal. Should a spill occur, many individuals could be exposed resulting in health effects, significant cleanup costs and widespread environmental contamination. Legislation banning the purchase or use of elemental mercury in primary and secondary schools in New York State became effective September 4, 2004. Check with the Office of Facilities Planning in the State Education Department (518-474-3906) or, in NYC, the Office of Environmental Health and Safety in the Department of Education (718-361-3808) for the latest information about this and other initiatives for removing mercury from schools.

### Brochures in this series

- Mercury and Schools: A Risky Combination
- Reducing Mercury in Schools: Superintendents, Principals, and School Boards
- Reducing Mercury in Schools: Science Teachers
- Reducing Mercury in Schools: Buildings and Grounds Superintendents
- Reducing Mercury in Schools: Health and Safety Committees
- Reducing Mercury in Schools: School Nurses
- Facility-Wide Inventory of Mercury and Mercury-Containing Devices
- Guidelines for Cleanup of Mercury Spills
- Disposal and Recycling Options for Mercury and Mercury-Containing Devices