

# The New Jersey School HEPA Distribution Program

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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The New Jersey Department of Health established a school HEPA distribution program to provide HEPA purifiers and replacement filters at no cost to all New Jersey K-12 schools and Early Childhood Education Centers (ECE) that choose to participate. These filters reduce airborne particles of infectious diseases and environmental allergens/irritants to help create a healthier environment for students and staff.



## The “What”

Poor indoor air quality, including the presence of contaminants like mold, can have detrimental effects on health, ranging from general discomfort to more serious conditions such as asthma and infections. Recognizing the importance of proper ventilation in creating a healthy environment, the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) utilized funding from the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) cooperative agreement to establish a school HEPA distribution program. The program provides HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) purifiers and replacement filters at no cost to all NJ schools that choose to participate. In May 2023, the program was extended to include early childhood education centers, with a particular focus on classrooms and health offices where students spend more time in close quarters with potentially inadequate ventilation.

The approach taken by NJDOH was guided by an equity lens, ensuring outreach and distribution efforts prioritized schools located in communities with high social vulnerability. The NJDOH COVID-19 call center played a crucial role in informing schools about the program and addressing any questions they had. Additionally, the NJDOH COVID-19 Testing Team conducted outreach phone calls to schools in high-priority communities.

By leveraging federal funding and focusing on both COVID-19 mitigation and environmental health, the program tackles public health challenges effectively. It addresses the immediate concerns related to infectious diseases, including COVID-19, while also improving the overall indoor environment for the well-being of New Jersey's children.



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HEPA units have proven effective in reducing airborne particles, including SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19. Students now have access to cleaner air, which contributes to their overall well-being.

## The “So What”

Over 2,000 K-12 schools and over 1,100 ECEs opted into the School HEPA Distribution program. Approximately 55% of all K-12 schools and about one third of ECEs statewide opted in and nearly 81% of schools in high priority communities are now equipped with HEPA purifiers and filters.

It's important to note that HEPA purifiers do not replace the need for proper ventilation. However, they can complement existing ventilation methods. These purifiers work by drawing air from a space, passing it through multiple layers of filters to remove pollutants, and then returning the purified air back into the room. HEPA units have proven effective in reducing airborne particles, including SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19.

The immediate improvement in indoor air quality resulting from the program is a crucial public health action. By reducing airborne particles of infectious diseases and environmental allergens/irritants, the program helps create a healthier environment for students and staff. While it is challenging to quantify the exact impact, it is evident that students now have access to cleaner air, which contributes to their overall well-being.

## The “Now What”

NJDOH actively worked to ensure the sustainability of the School HEPA Distribution program and its impact. While the initial funding covered up to three replacement filter sets per distributed unit, extending the device's lifespan for approximately two school years. The program expanded to allow for an additional three replacement filter sets per unit received, increasing the sustainability of the funding effort.

To support the program and other essential epidemiology, surveillance, and infrastructure activities there is a continued need for increased longer-term funding. Adequate funding is crucial to maintain the momentum and effectiveness of the program, ensuring that schools can continue to benefit from improved indoor air quality.

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