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TOXIC PORTABLES? STATE NEEDS TO ADDRESS SCHOOL AIR QUALITY CONCERNS

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An environmental group has dubbed California's burgeoning number of portable school classrooms "glue boxes," and while the label surely is designed to stir worries about students being forced to sniff noxious fumes in school, it is difficult to dismiss as mere hype. A state-commissioned panel of scientists, school officials and environmental health specialists has raised similar concerns -- albeit in slightly less alarmist language -- that have been left unaddressed in the 10 months since it issued its troubling findings.

The "glue box" report, issued by the Environmental Working Group, contends that volatile organic compounds used in construction materials of portable classrooms -- formaldehyde, benzene and toluene -- are being breathed by children and their teachers in poorly ventilated portables statewide. The state's report suggests that the haste with which many of the newest portables were purchased and installed did not allow enough time to "off-gas" (or release into the air) some of those hazardous chemicals. Instead, that's often taking place while students and teachers are inside the classrooms, frequently with the windows closed.

The number of portables has grown dramatically since 1997, when California reduced class sizes in the primary grades and created a huge new demand for classroom space. Today, more than 2 million students spend some part of their school day inside an estimated 85,000 portable classrooms.

The state's report looks beyond portables to include concerns about the potential ill health effects of mold, decay and poor ventilation in thousands of neglected permanent classrooms. The report makes a strong case for a statewide effort to train school staffs about how to properly maintain and ventilate facilities -- portable and permanent -- to minimize student and teacher exposure to chemicals. It also calls for a study of the kinds of materials being used in classroom construction.

While the Davis administration has yet to take action, Assemblyman Kevin Shelley has introduced a bill, AB 1207, that would mandate the training recommended by the state's report. The bill would also direct school districts to use the least toxic pest control methods available and limit their use of carcinogenic pesticides on school grounds. The Assembly has approved the bill, and the Senate and governor would do well to follow suit.

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