

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Assembly Bill 841 will make schools safer with better ventilation for when students return

BY TONY THURMOND *SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE*
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It has been six months since Gov. Gavin Newsom first issued school-related executive orders as a result of the [COVID-19 health emergency](#).

Since that time, we have seen most of [our public schools](#) shift successfully to distance learning, while parents and students across the state are anxious for a return to in-person instruction.

During the COVID-19 crisis, when students are not physically present in school buildings, we have a unique opportunity to make changes on our school campuses that will safeguard children, teachers and communities against the virus while dramatically improving energy efficiency that will save schools money.

It is not often that we have an immediate need and can make an immediate impact with legislation. But Assembly Bill 841, known as the Healthy Schools for a Healthy Recovery Bill, will help do just that. AB 841, written by Assemblymember Phil Ting, D-San Francisco, will make schools safer in the time of COVID-19, save schools money, put people to work today and generate cleaner air for communities — all at no cost to taxpayers.

AB 841, which awaits the governor's signature, will have an immediate impact by providing funds to fix, replace and upgrade old and inefficient HVAC systems to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, and repair and replace old, inefficient water fixtures that might leach lead into drinking water.

With research strongly suggesting that [COVID-19 can be transmitted](#) through respiratory droplets in the air, poor ventilation in California classrooms is a major obstacle to reopening schools safely.

Even prior to the pandemic, poor ventilation in schools posed a significant health risk to students. UC Davis researchers recently found 85% of California classrooms lack proper ventilation. In June, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that more than half of America's public-school districts are in need of significant repairs to school facilities, with HVAC systems being most frequently in need of repair.

The GAO's report also found that high-poverty schools were more likely to need additional funding for building repairs. AB 841 provides that by putting schools that need repairs the most at the front of the line.

This is critical for getting kids and teachers safely back into classrooms. The CDC recommends "ventilation systems operate properly" as a key consideration for school leaders considering reopening. AB 841 addresses that problem. That's why the bill has the support of schools and teachers, public health experts, labor, business and environmental organizations.

Making these efficiency improvements will also lead to long-term savings for schools, freeing up funds to invest in students, while conserving water and energy, and slashing climate pollution.

In addition, ventilation is a long-term issue with powerful observed results. A Berkeley Lab report on ventilation rates and school performance indicates that properly ventilated rooms can increase student performance by up to 15%.

Best of all, because the bill redirects unspent investor-owned utility energy efficiency funds, there is no cost to taxpayers.

This is a rare opportunity to responsibly [prepare our schools for reopening](#) in the age of COVID-19 that will also create jobs and generate enormous economic benefits when we need them most.

There is still a great deal of uncertainty about COVID-19 and I am not suggesting that enacting this legislation will mean immediate reopening of our schools. I have been clear that any place where there is uncertainty, we should proceed with caution. In many cases, that's going to mean continuing distance learning.

But getting kids back to school is one of the single best things we can do for students and the economy and it should be our goal. AB 841 will make that possible sooner, while generating jobs today and protecting the health of students and teachers.

[Gov. Newsom](#) should take advantage of this rare window of opportunity and sign this legislation to improve the health and safety of school children, teachers and parents, solidify California's commitment to clean air and energy efficiency and add jobs when and where they are most needed.

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