

Newark, New Jersey schools shut off lead-poisoned drinking water

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New Jersey's largest school district shut off drinking water to 30 schools Wednesday after tests revealed dangerous levels of lead. Newark Public Schools and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection announced the temporary shutoff while additional sampling is carried out. In the interim, Newark schools pledged to provide bottled water for drinking and food preparation, but not for other uses such as hand and dishwashing.

The 30 schools, out of 66 district-wide, all contained at least one sample that exceeded the Environmental Protection Agency's action threshold of 15 parts per billion. One school, Bard High School, recorded a level of 558 parts per billion, or 37 times the actionable level. Six other schools had readings exceeding 100 parts per billion, according to results released by the Department of Environmental Protection.

Officials offered no estimate of how long students may have been exposed to high concentrations of the neurotoxin. The current round of testing occurred as part of annual sampling. The results were fast-tracked after staff at one elementary school complained about discolored water. Yet the alarming number of abnormal results, encompassing 45 percent of the district's schools, raises questions about whether officials ignored or covered up the results in previous years.

The announcement Wednesday attempted to downplay the health risks and distance Newark from Flint, Michigan, where poisoning from lead-tainted water has precipitated a political crisis. A statement released jointly by the city and state proclaimed, "Parents should have no concerns about students' water and food consumption at the school while the situation is addressed."

Health experts, however, insist that there is no safe level of lead exposure, especially among children, who

are vulnerable to the element's toxic effects due to growing bodies and developing brains. Lead accumulated over time in the body can cause severe cognitive and behavioral problems, along with organ and tissue damage.

Newark Mayor Ras Baraka was particularly outspoken in playing down the toxic danger. "I understand in the Flint environment any sight of elevation is going to make everyone go haywire. It's still safe, still drinkable," he told the press on Wednesday. "It's irresponsible to [compare Newark to Flint]. That is absolutely not the case."

Environmental officials maintain that the supply water in Newark is clean. Rather, the lead found in the schools is due to leaching from pipes and fixtures associated with the schools themselves. "This is an infrastructure issue," Baraka said on Wednesday.

However, in Newark, like Flint and scores of other cities in the Midwest and Northeast, the municipal water infrastructure and the building stock have decayed to the point of near collapse in recent decades. According to a report prepared for Newark City Council in 2013, Newark has approximately \$500 million in unmet municipal water infrastructure repairs.

The dismantling of industrial production left unemployment and social devastation in its wake. Poverty rates in Newark stand at 30 percent among all residents and 42 percent among children.

Newark's rate of lead exposure along with other health problems typically associated with poverty far exceed national levels. Lead exposure occurs not only through drinking water, but frequently through peeling lead paint and dust in aging homes, many of which are in disrepair in Newark. A report by Isles, Inc., a Trenton, New Jersey-based environmental group, notes that the rate of childhood lead poisoning in Newark is

higher than in Flint. Of 14,000 children tested for blood lead levels in Newark, an astonishing 5.7 percent had elevated levels. Since 2000, approximately 225,000 children statewide have been revealed to have lead poisoning.

The lead exposure in Newark Public Schools points to a larger crisis nationally, the scale of which is unknown. The federal government only requires testing at a minuscule portion of schools nationwide. For the rest, approximately 90,000 schools, testing is completely voluntary.



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