

# Thousands of Detroit children exposed to lead or copper contaminated water

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On Friday, school officials announced that nearly one third of recently tested elementary and middle schools in Detroit Public Schools (DPS)—just 60 miles from the Flint, Michigan, lead poisoning disaster—are contaminated with either lead or copper in the drinking water.

Fifteen schools registered lead-in-water samples greater than the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) current safety threshold of 15 parts per billion (ppb); and eight had more than the 1,300-ppb level set for copper. The highest lead levels were found during first-draw samples at drinking fountains at Ronald Brown Academy (1,500 ppb), Moses-Field Elementary-Middle School (280 ppb) and Carver Academy (83 ppb).

The sample at Ronald Brown Academy—showing 100 times the EPA lead standard—was taken from a drinking fountain labeled “Pre-K.”

No level of lead is considered safe to ingest. It is a neurotoxin that causes irreversible brain damage and assorted behavioral problems for children. Older children and adults can suffer a broad range of problems including stomach and abdominal pain, headaches, and miscarriage. Copper is known to cause liver damage and kidney disease.

Altogether 19 DPS schools, of the 62 tested beginning at the end of March, have registered toxic contamination. One school, Sampson Webber Middle School, had no clean water available at all last Friday. DPS plans to test its remaining 31 buildings over the next two weeks.

The startling results prompted Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, in charge of the Detroit Health Department, to advise that all children in the city under six years of age be tested for lead poisoning, according to the *Detroit Free Press*. “The 15 [parts per billion] is the actionable limit,” he told the newspaper. “But ideally, we want no lead in the water. The most important thing is to make sure that kids are no longer getting the water and that the kids themselves are getting tested.”

“I was definitely upset to learn that there was lead and copper in the water of DPS schools,” Dorothea, the mother of two children in Detroit schools, told the *World Socialist*

*Web Site*.

“Currently, my children attend the old Northern High school. My children both have disabilities. My youngest daughter has been suspended on multiple occasions due to behaviors. These suspensions continue, and her behaviors have gotten worse.

“I am curious if the escalation in her behaviors are related to possible lead ingestion. My older daughter has disabilities that impact her physically, emotionally and socially. It is my understanding from her teachers that she has become disinterested in learning. She already suffers with ADHD and more. Could this disinterest be coming from possible lead ingestion?

“I plan to have both of my children tested because so many of the older schools have high lead traces. It is my understanding that lead can cause so many negative health impacts in learning and in proper development.”

Dorothea also referred to the little-known fact that US federal law does not require all school systems to test the water being delivered to students, despite the well-documented and irreversible brain damage caused by lead, as well as other dire consequences from other dissolved metals. Astoundingly, about 90 percent of schools in the US do not test their water and are not required to if they use municipal services, according to a report in *Russia Today*.

Outrage over the mass lead poisoning in Flint has led to belated calls in the Michigan legislature for stricter limits on lead in drinking water. Governor Rick Snyder, who bears a large share of the responsibility for the city's calamity, has now sought to cover his tracks by calling for a 10-ppb ceiling by 2020. In fact, 10 ppb is already the standard of the World Health Organization and therefore most of the world.

Detroit Health Department officials responded to the DPS crisis by demanding a full mitigation plan in 15 days and a 90-day action plan going forward.

It is well established that schools in older buildings using lead delivery pipes are most likely to have contaminated water. However, many schools simply cannot afford to replace the antiquated pipes. Michigan is one of several

states that provide zero dollars for building infrastructure updates—any revenues needed to rehabilitate aging buildings must be raised from hard-pressed individual homeowners through additional property tax levies.

“The water is bad because of poor maintenance in the school buildings,” Dorothea agreed. “Look at Spain! Those kids have gone through so much,” she said, referring to the elementary school that became notorious for its terrible conditions during the teacher walkouts last January. The building has a leaky roof and a broken school yard, and had its gym sectioned off from school due to pervasive mold—and this week it has been identified as having lead in the water.

Dorothea said similar problems were plaguing Northern. “The roof continually leaks. There are plumbing problems in restrooms, leaks in the small gym, mold in classrooms. Many times the heat does not work in the winter. Staff and students are walking around with their coats on. There is poor inside and outside maintenance. This all creates safety concerns. Not only that, rodents are coming out.”

School district authorities attempted to put a positive spin on the lead-in-water crisis in Detroit schools by saying that the district was being “proactive” in conducting tests, pledging to bring in more bottled water and post warnings regarding drinking from bathroom sinks.

After the first two schools tested positive for metal contaminants, the DPS emergency manager, Stephen Rhodes, issued a complacent statement emphasizing that schools provide “8 oz. bottles of water for students to drink with meals and throughout the day.” Finally, the “transition manager” tried to offload responsibility by saying the “main place for exposure [to lead] is in the home due to lead-based paint that is damaged and peeling. This is especially true in cities that have older housing stock such as Detroit. ...”

Such official apologetics for the role of the Democrats and Republicans and the profit system itself are wearing thin. Dorothea said, “The governor is the lead person here. He appoints the emergency manager. They brought in [DPS Emergency Manager] Darnell Earley, someone not familiar with education.

“It is my understanding that state law mandates we send our children to school. Failure to do so means a parent can face truancy charges, penalties and even jail time. State law states our school system must ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of our babies when they are in the schools’ care. How could they do this?

“Could the deplorable conditions account for these low achievement levels? Parents are damned if they do and damned if don’t send children to school. What a government!” she concluded.

There is mounting evidence that crumbling infrastructure

in American schools is creating a national health and safety problem.

In March, sinks and water fountains at 30 of 66 schools in Newark, New Jersey, were ordered to be shut off after testing indicated they were delivering unsafe water. The high lead levels were known about as far back as six years ago, according to the *New York Times*, but they were generally dealt with by adding water filters or replacing faucets.

An elementary school in Ringle, Wisconsin, tore out its drinking fountains more than 10 years ago and decided to start buying bottled water for its students (at a cost of \$1,000 a month), because replacing the pipes was far more costly, according to the Associated Press. Pennsylvania, Maine and New Jersey have been cited as having the greatest numbers of schools with unsafe drinking water.

Among schools and day care centers operating their own water systems, EPA data analyzed by the Associated Press showed 278 violated federal lead levels at some point during the past three years. About a third of those had lead levels at least double the federal limit. Yanna Lambrinidou, president of Parents for Nontoxic Alternatives and a colleague of Virginia Tech’s Marc Edwards, added that under EPA guidelines, schools and day care centers are legally entitled to report that an entire building is safe even if an individual drinking fountain is above the threshold.

By far, most cases of lead-in-water within schools arise from aging buildings with lead pipes, older drinking fountains and water fixtures with parts made from lead. A recent study entitled *State of Our Schools: America’s K–12 Facilities* explains that an abysmal support level for educational building and maintenance has resulted in a \$46 billion per year shortfall in critical upkeep or new construction to keep US schools at recognized building standards.

*State of Our Schools* estimates that it would take an investment of \$145 billion to provide safe and healthy schools across the country. The low priority, under capitalism, of children’s health and education is demonstrated by the fact that this seemingly large sum represents only some 14% of the US military’s annual budget.



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