

# Chicago schools and water infrastructure plagued by lead contamination

**Our reporter**  
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On 16 January, Governor Bruce Rauner of the state of Illinois signed into law legislation mandating testing water sources for lead at Illinois elementary schools and daycare centers. The plan requires only a one-time testing of schools with students up to fifth grade and facilities built before 2000. The cost of testing and notifying parents will be paid by schools and facilities, which could run into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

If the water sources tested show contamination above five parts per billion (ppb) the school is required to notify parents. There are no provisions in the law that require action be taken by the school if contamination is discovered. At present, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends schools shut off water facilities when results show 20 ppb or greater of lead. The law allows districts to use property tax dollars levied for school safety to cover testing and remediation costs.

The impetus for this legislation was based on earlier testing that had been conducted in April-May of 2016 as a pilot project. Citing concerns after learning of tainted water in Flint, Michigan, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) hired private companies to test drinking water in elementary schools deemed at greatest risk because of their pre-K programs, or because kitchens and or other facilities were built before 1987. The use of lead pipes in construction was finally banned by an act of Congress in mid-1986. Other schools that did not fit the criteria paid for their testing. Thirty-two schools were tested, obtaining 236 samples.

Twenty-five schools had no traces, six had levels below EPA standards and one school, Henry O Tanner, had elevated levels. CPS was prompted in May 2016 to order the testing of drinking water in all their schools, comprising 527 campuses, with 470 campuses built before 1987.

As an initial measure, the three water fountains at Tanner were removed, and water coolers were brought in. Lead levels at these three fountains ranged from 19.8 to 47.5 ppb. The one fountain with the highest level had been turned off for some time. Standing water in lead pipes tends to leach the metals out of the piping. By June, 327 schools had completed testing. Of 6,167 fixtures tested, 184 fixtures (3 percent) from 113 different schools returned levels above the EPA's action levels of 15 ppb.

Scientific research shows that even the most minute amounts of lead, under five ppb, can cause significant neurobehavioral damage, especially in children. There is no threshold where lead does not cause injury to the brain and other biological systems, including the immune, cardiovascular and reproductive systems. Much of this damage is considered irreversible and untreatable.

A group of environmental organizations, citing the results discovered in the Chicago Public Schools, pushed for a law requiring schools throughout Illinois to test for high lead levels in drinking fountains, sinks, and other water sources. However, the Illinois Municipal League, an advocacy group for local governments, opposed the bill out of concern that municipalities which supply public water would be on the hook for cost of problems that stem from a building's internal plumbing.

School administrators and superintendents were worried about unfunded mandates that would place on the schools the cost burden of testing and possible repairs to old pipes and fixtures that may be required. Current financial conditions in state governments, public schools and municipalities are considerably stretched. Some schools are reportedly borrowing against next year's tax levy to finish off the school

year. In all, there are approximately 2,600 public and 1,200 private schools across the state serving preschool through fifth grade, and it is unclear how many of those were built before 1987.

Chicago finally began replacing and updating miles of the city's aging water lines in 2012. There are more than 4,000 miles of water mains under the city and the 10-year plan will replace 900 miles of water pipes. Though the mains are not made of lead, 80 percent of the service lines that connect up to the water mains from homes, businesses and schools are made of lead pipes. The process of replacing these water mains actually disturbs the lead service lines and increases the amount of lead in the city's drinking water.

On February 18, 2016, Chicago residents filed a class-action lawsuit against the city, claiming that the city started a construction project that exponentially increased the risk of toxic levels of lead in residents' tap water and the city failed to warn residents. When lead service lines are disturbed, they can release lead for weeks, months or even years after the disturbance.

Lead has no essential role in the human body. It is an environmental toxin of the industrial age. With the urbanization of the US, specifically after World War II, much of the lead toxicity witnessed was due to leaded gasoline used in cars and lead paint for homes. It was only in the late 70s and 80s that lead-containing products were phased out and use of lead in pipes was federally prohibited.

However, as much of the infrastructure of the last several decades is deteriorating, despite national blood lead levels dropping drastically, hot spots of lead toxicity and poisoning persist. Many of these are located in impoverished city neighborhoods in Baltimore and Philadelphia or rural regions outside South Bend, Indiana or St Joseph, Missouri.

Chicago's overall rate of lead poisoning, like in many of the nation's cities, has dropped steadily during the past two decades. But the disparities between rich and poor grow wider. Some census tracts, smaller geographic areas within neighborhoods, haven't seen a case of lead poisoning in years. Children ages five and younger continue to be harmed at rates up to six times the city average in corners of impoverished, predominantly African-American neighborhoods, according to a *Chicago Tribune* analysis of city records. These areas endure chronic violence and

struggling schools.

Over the last five years, in more than 20 percent of the city's census tracts the rate of lead poisoning has risen. There are insufficient funds to inspect properties, fix lead hazards and aid families. Chicago has cut funding for their anti-lead programs by 50 percent to \$4 million.

The city blames the steep reductions in federal and state grants to local health departments for this problem. In 2011, President Barack Obama's administration moved to merge lead poisoning and asthma prevention programs and cut the Center for Disease Control's budget for this purpose by half. Congress went even further by slashing such funds 94 percent. After three years without funding, Chicago received \$347,000 last year compared to \$1.2 million yearly between 2005 and 2010. It remains to be seen how Chicago Public Schools will confront these realities in light of the new legal mandated for testing.

The response by Republican Governor Bruce Rauner, state legislators as well as the silence on the matter by the Democratic mayor of Chicago and the Chicago Teachers Union is emblematic of the nature of bourgeois politics and its inability to address the real concerns that affect the population. Any genuine effort at tackling the crisis of lead poisoning requires major funding, organization, and long term planning—imperatives that go against the capitalist profit system. Meanwhile, the citizens of Flint, MI, continue to buy bottled water and pay for water they cannot use and lead still seeps into the water of Chicago.



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