

Lead-tainted drinking water found throughout San Diego schools

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Schools throughout the San Diego Unified School District and in surrounding communities began testing for lead in their drinking water on April 14. A majority of those examined so far have tested positive for elevated levels of lead in their water; at least eight schools have exceeded the minimum threshold for lead in water set by the state of California and will require immediate action.

At present, the US Environmental Protection Agency recommends schools shut off water facilities when results show 20 parts per billion (ppb) or greater of lead. However, as of January of this year the California State Water Resources Control Board mandated new regulations that lead in water cannot exceed 15 ppb and school sites may receive free testing by any request from a school official.

Prior to the state lowering the official limit to 15ppb school administrators recklessly resisted notifying parents and students of significant levels of lead contamination.

At Sunset View Elementary in the Point Loma neighborhood last year a parent requested for testing at the school's site because of nearby construction. The school was found to have lead coming from a device known as a backflow preventer that was found to contain 15 ppb. When the results came back positive, the district only notified the parent who requested it because it did not meet the threshold of the EPA's standard of 20 ppb.

At least 305 schools in the San Diego area have requested to have their water tested under the new state program. The testing is slated to be completed by the middle of this month with no indication, however, of when all necessary repairs will be completed.

The lead testing program was initiated by school officials after receiving grievances from parents who

complained that their children were having stomach problems and reported smelly water coming from the water fountains.

The testing also comes in the midst of a national wave of concern after the exposure of criminal violations of standards for lead in the drinking water of Flint, Michigan.

Around the nation schools have recently undertaken testing initiatives with dangerously high traces of lead found in drinking water in cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, New York City and Detroit. In New York City there has been no testing of water for the past ten years. In Newark, New Jersey, half of the schools had sampled lead levels that were above 15 ppb.

San Diego is no exception to the outright neglect of basic social infrastructure. Ira Harbison Elementary school contained lead levels in one of its water sources which had lead levels as high as 20 ppb. Other schools in the city have confirmed higher levels, Emerson-Bandini had one water fountain at a level of 29 ppb, while one water fountain at San Diego Co-Operative Charter School 2 tested positive at 38.6 ppb.

While few schools in San Diego exceeded the threshold of 15 ppb, many schools still display high levels of lead:

- Angier Elementary had a result of 10.2 ppb at one kitchen water source.
- Chesterton Elementary has a positive result over 5 ppm at an auditorium area fountain.
- Farb Middle School tested positive at 6.97 ppb at a fountain in the office.

Although these schools and many more like it tested positive, no immediate action will take place because they did not meet the threshold of 15 ppb.

The WSWWS recently spoke to the parents of students

at Ira Harbison Elementary School in National City, a suburb of San Diego about the lead-in-water crisis.

Melissa, a mother of two, expressed disbelief about school administrators' long term neglect of the potential problem of lead poisoning, "I am upset, shocked—these are our kids. Some parents were upset that the school never checked before."

"This state is terrible, it does not care about the citizens. I would shut down the school immediately and re-do everything," Chelisee, a mother of two remarked.

"I want to go get my children to get lead-tested. I know that not all the parents will get their children tested because we are going to be doing it out of our pockets."

According to the California Public Interest Research group and the American Academy of Pediatrics there is no safe level of lead in drinking water provided to children. Lead is a neurotoxin that causes irreversible brain damage and assorted behavioral problems for children. Even the most minute amount of lead can cause significant neurobehavioral damage.

Lead is an environmental toxin that was banned from being used in pipes and plumbing materials with the passing of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act in 1986. There are at least 447 schools across San Diego that were built before 1986, making the potential to have high levels of lead greater.

In 2009, California's health department, the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, set a public health goal of limiting lead contamination in drinking water to 0.2 ppb. By this standard, most schools in San Diego require immediate action.



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