Lead at some Detroit schools 50 times the allowable federal level

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This week, Detroiters learned that at least two district public schools have lead-in-water levels over 50 times the allowable federal guidelines. Tests also showed that one school's water contained copper at 29 times the limit established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

When schools opened for the school year, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) Superintendent Nikolai Vitti belatedly reported that testing conducted last spring showed that there were elevated levels of lead and copper found in water testing at 16 out of 24 schools.

Parents, students and teachers immediately voiced outrage, keenly aware of the still ongoing lead-in-water crisis in Flint, only 70 miles away. All water spigots were turned off throughout the DPSCD and bottled water was supplied.

From August to September, more schools were added to the list. In the middle of September, another 33 schools were added, bringing the total number of schools tainted with lead or copper to 57, or more than half the schools in the district.

Further horrifying news was revealed on Tuesday, when the *Detroit News* reported the shocking levels of lead in the schools. Mason Elementary and Mark Twain School for Scholars had lead levels over 50 times the allowable federal guidelines established by the EPA (54.2 and 53.8 times, respectively), and Bethune Elementary had a copper water level that was 29 times the allowable level.

These levels surpass those recorded in Flint schools during the height of the crisis in 2015. At that time, the school with the highest lead levels, Freeman Elementary School, was tested at 101 parts per billion (ppb), six times the federal standard.

Another 17 Detroit buildings are still awaiting the outcome of toxicity tests, meaning the number of tainted schools in the district could approach the three-quarters mark.

Ten of the 57 DPSCD schools had lead levels 10 times the allowable level, 7 schools were above 20 times the allowable level and 3 were above 40 times the allowable level. Fully 24 schools had elevated copper levels in the tested drinking water. Four schools had copper levels that were 10 times the allowable limit and one, Bethune Elementary-Middle School, had a level close to 30 times the federal standard. Eight schools had both high lead and copper levels.

The other half of the Detroit school system—94 charter schools, many of them for-profits—have not been tested. The charter schools are predominantly housed in former DPS buildings and are therefore likely affected in the same proportion as DPSCD schools.

According to the EPA, 15 micrograms per liter of lead in water (15 parts per billion) is toxic. The EPA limits copper to 1,300 micrograms per liter. Lead and copper have devastating effects on children. The EPA says that even low levels of lead in the blood of children can result in lower IQ, learning and behavioral problems, slowed growth, anemia and hearing problems. Copper in water causes adverse health effects, including vomiting, diarrhea, liver or kidney damage, and stomach cramps.

The American Academy for Pediatrics says there are no safe blood lead levels in children. They assert that exposure causes irreversible cognitive and behavioral problems.

"We now know that there is no safe level of blood lead concentration for children, and the best 'treatment' for lead poisoning is to prevent any exposure before it happens," said Dr. Jennifer Lowry, chair of the AAP Council on Environmental Health in their website. "Most existing lead standards fail to protect children. They provide only an illusion of safety. Instead we need to expand the funding and technical guidance for local and state governments to remove lead hazards from children's homes, and we need federal standards that will truly protect children."

Anger among students and teachers

The WSWS spoke to students and teachers about the crisis in the school system. Katrina Brown, a science teacher at Marion Law Academy, a middle school in the DPSCD system, said she was deeply saddened by the news of the lead levels found in the schools.

"This news really broke my heart," Brown said. "This issue happened back in 2016 when I first told them about the lead and copper in the water."

In 2016 Brown was the principal in a lawsuit against the Board of Education over toxins she discovered while teaching at J.R. King Academy in Detroit. She won the case in an administrative court. As a part of the settlement the school district agreed to be tested each year and the case forced OSHA to fine the school district.

"We made an agreement after I won my lawsuit that the schools would be tested each year for lead and copper," Brown continued. "So, to me, a lot of things could have been avoided if they had been proactive rather than reactive and trying to sweep things under the rug."

The lawsuit, however cost her her job. She was reprimanded, faced threats on her life and was out of work for a year.

For the 2018 school year Brown was hired to teach at Marion Law. As a science educator Brown had her students analyze the water in their school and the results showed toxicity. She said the kids talked about it and word got back to the principal, who told her to keep quiet, telling her it is a brand new school and that the water was safe.

"So, since then we got our tests results back, 45 days ago, and my school, which is a brand new building, shows it has lead and copper," she said.

"I was so upset because even after I tried to tell her there was lead and copper in the water after the tests, I was told once again that this is a brand new building."

Echoing the view of many teachers and students on why no one was told about the problem earlier, Brown said, "When the test results came out this June they should have alerted the community. But they allowed the

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students and teachers to continue to drink water. There were six-and-a-half weeks of summer school—that water should have been turned off! But they were buying time. And you know, it can't be detected after two months, so they bought time.

"I think they should at least have the health department in every school."

Brooke, a Cass Tech High student who participated in a walkout to protest the lead water crisis, told the *World Socialist Web Site*that he was incensed by the claim that there is no money to fix the schools. Cass Tech, considered one of the elite schools with a brand new building, also is reported to have lead and copper in its water system.

Brooke said, "They say there's no money to fix the water piping, but it's BS. You see a fancy new stadium across from my school, Little Caesar's. You wouldn't know that the city gave $400 million to a billionaire Mike Ilitch's company to build it. But they don't want to put out the money to schools."

Joyce, a senior at Western International High School who participate in the walkout, said, "We're scared. We've seen what Flint went through and we're terrified that we could be going down the same path. We're being told it's safe to shower but not to drink it. But that's what they said to people in Flint four years ago.

"Why does no one have answers? Supposedly, nobody is to blame. Everyone we go to says, 'It's not our fault.' The City of Detroit says it's not their fault. The school board says it's not their fault. We know this is a possible issue in homes as well. I have a school 0.5 miles away from me.

"I'm 16. We've got money to go and invade other countries, but they can't even take care of our students? A lot of people lost their homes and became homeless after 2008. A lot of people moved back with their families. Me and my mum moved back in with my grandmother and grandfather.

"I think something has to change."

During 2015 and 2016 Detroit teachers held a series of sickouts and protests against the schools' deteriorating and unsafe infrastructure. However, their strike was isolated and unceremoniously shut down through the action of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and the Detroit Federation of Teachers, in league with local Democratic Party politicians and the Obama administration.

In the immediate aftermath of the strikes, in April 2016, it was revealed that 19 out of 62 Detroit schools that were tested had lead or copper in the water above the federal guidelines. Today that number has almost tripled.

Vitti and Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan seek to limit the blame for these criminal social conditions to state Republican Governor Rick Snyder and his legislative cothinkers. However, the majority of the emergency managers running both the city and school district during this period were Democrats who ruthlessly cut education funding and teachers' pay for over a decade. Michigan is among the states that provide zero dollars for school infrastructure; all upgrades are funded through regressive property taxes on workers.

Finally, the series of measures enacted five years ago during the bankruptcy of Detroit and the dissolution of the Detroit Public Schools which followed have resulted in an unprecedented decline in Detroit neighborhoods and schools, the widespread privatization of city resources and the gutting of pensions. A critical part of the bankruptcy program was the partial privatization of the Detroit water system. Nearly 80 percent of the workforce was eliminated, including the chemists charged with monitoring water quality.

Vitti's overwhelming concern in this crisis has been damage control. He falsely has taken credit for testing the schools' water, rather than admit it was Brown's lawsuit that forced the action. At a public meeting last month he was indifferent to the demands of teachers and parents that all students be tested for lead poisoning or the suggestion that the problems with the water were broader than an aging infrastructure in the schools.

Seeking to promote the fraudulent claim by Detroit's corporate elite of a "comeback" by the nation's poorest large city, Vitti has received assistance from big business foundations for "hydration stations" in all schools. There has been no indication that an investigation will be conducted as to the source of the contamination and its wider implications for residents, much less full-scale remediation, any more than there has been for Flint.

National lead crisis in schools across US

Moreover, while the lead levels in Detroit expose again the criminal disregard of the financial elite for the welfare of children, the crisis is not the aberration it might seem.

In September it was announced that Indiana tested 915 schools in recent months and found that 61 percent had one or more fixtures with elevated lead levels. In Montgomery County, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C., the district is midway through replacing 238 fixtures that had elevated lead. Pueblo City Schools, in Colorado, concluded its first-ever water testing at its 31 schools over the past few weeks. Of more than 580 water fountains and other fixtures tested, the district disabled or repaired 27 which had lead above 15 ppb, the EPA's standard for public water systems.

Dr. Mark Edwards, who played a prominent role in exposing Flint's poisoned water, told the WSWS: "The standards are voluntary, 30 years out of date, and not sufficiently protective by any standard. We have chaos around the country as every school system decides 'how low is safe' on their own. We have some schools using only bottled water at one extreme, still other schools that have not even tested according to the outdated EPA standard at another, and everything in between. We desperately need a national standard."

According to the Government Accountability Office, only 43 percent of school districts in the country, serving 35 million students, tested their water for lead in 2016–2017. Most states, including Michigan, do not require school testing for lead or copper. Of those districts that were tested, 37 percent had elevated lead in their water systems.

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