

Philadelphia students kept in asbestos-ridden school for over two years

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In another example of the hazardous and deteriorating conditions of public education in the city of Philadelphia, an inspection this month of West Oak Lane's Building 21 uncovered the carcinogen asbestos in the auditorium balcony and on two stairwells. When inhaled, it can lead to a number of deadly conditions, including mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer.

It has been revealed that the School District of Philadelphia knew about the asbestos contamination for at least two years and did nothing about it. Superintendent Tony Watlington admitted as much in a letter to parents, saying, "records indicate asbestos damage has existed in the auditorium since June 2021, and possibly longer."

Students were sent home early on Wednesday, March 1. But the district proceeded to downplay the danger posed by the toxins and to attempt to convince parents the building is still safe for educational instruction to resume. Watlington said that school-district "crews have conducted two types of air-quality tests that measure fibers in the air. All tests have returned results for samples from the auditorium that are well below acceptable limits."

Parents expressed disbelief and outrage over children being exposed to asbestos for long periods of time. One parent said "If y'all knew for a couple of years, how is it that y'all didn't say anything, and our kids were still going there, having assemblies?"

Another parent, Shaneka Lewis, asked, "If you knew something like that why wouldn't you take heed when you found out about the situation? Now you want to know, like, do they know about all the other buildings in the schools and everything?"

Educators and school workers were also exposed to the asbestos for two years. Derrick Houck, music and math teacher at the school, told *The Inquirer*, "We're

thinking about our mortality. There's just anger and fear. We're obviously frustrated with the current district administration for keeping us out of the loop as all this news is revealed, and we're wondering about [former Superintendent] William Hite, and [former chief operating officer] Reggie McNeal, who were in charge at the time. We've got no answers from anybody so far."

Rather than switch to remote learning until it was safe to return, the school district attempted to send children to a different school, Strawberry Mansion High School, posing transportation problems for parents.

The superintendent and school administration convened an emergency meeting to try to placate the anger from parents and educators, and to quash demands for remote learning. After parents lambasted the superintendent, the school district reversed course, at least temporarily.

Tomás Hanna, assistant superintendent for secondary schools acceded to parents' demands that their children not be moved to a distant school, but he set up hurdles against remote learning. Families who wish to use remote learning "will need to provide the administration with a written excusal demonstrating their concern" according to Hanna's rules.

Of a student population of 390, only 22 students returned for instruction on Monday at the new location. The rest remained on virtual schooling.

Asbestos contamination is a serious issue in many public schools in Philadelphia. In the 2019-2020 school year alone, 12 schools shut down due to asbestos contamination. In 2020, the Philadelphia School Board was forced to pay \$850,000 to a teacher who had contracted mesothelioma after having taught for many years in an asbestos contaminated school.

Since 2016, there have been over 2,289 asbestos

abatement projects across the School District of Philadelphia. Elementary schools account for 1,675 of these, according to 6abc Data Journalism.

Just two days ago, on March 8, Simon Gratz High School was closed temporarily due to asbestos contamination, marking the second time in a month asbestos has been discovered in Philadelphia schools. Simon Gratz, with an enrollment of about 1,000, is located about 15 minutes away from Building 21. The school reported asbestos was found during a mandatory inspection by the federal government.

The horrendous conditions in public schools, which threaten health and undermine learning, have been created by both big business parties across the United States, and impact both urban and rural schools.

While Philadelphia is a Democratic Party-led city in which politicians feign support for public education, nothing has been done to eradicate asbestos, rid buildings of lead-tainted water, or repair crumbling infrastructure—or even to protect teachers and students from COVID-19.

In his state budget proposal, newly elected Democratic governor of Pennsylvania Josh Shapiro touted spending increases for public education. But even the Democratic party-leaning think tank Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center refuted this argument, saying it “keeps up with general inflation but does little more.”

Recently, the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court ruled unconstitutional the state’s school funding system, based on property taxes, by which wealthy schools receive more funding and poorer districts less. The ruling also drew attention to the fact that Pennsylvania schools are underfunded by nearly \$4 billion.

The defense of public education, along with safe working and learning conditions, can only be fought for and resolved based on a movement of the working class, completely independent of the Democratic party and the pro-capitalist, Democratic party-led trade unions such as the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers headed up by Jerry Jordan, and the American Federation of Teachers run by Randi Weingarten, who is also on the Democratic National Committee.

This is what the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are fighting for.



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