

The lead poisoning of Milwaukee Public Schools students

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In January, the City of Milwaukee Health Department (MHD) determined that a student in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) was poisoned by lead paint exposure at the school they attended. In the ensuing four months, an ongoing, escalating crisis has unfolded that has included the closure of multiple school buildings, the firing of the MPS senior director of facilities and maintenance, demonstrations by parents, educators and community members, the adverse impact of the federal Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) on the response, and most importantly revelations of the dire consequences of the chronic underfunding of public education in the state of Wisconsin.

Among those responsible for this social crime are the Democratic Party, which has led the city for decades, and the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA) union, which has maintained a stranglehold on educators—who are outraged by the poisoning of their students—by failing to call for labor actions to demand that the city address the issue.

The urgency of the situation requires the mobilization of educators, parents, students, and the community to form school and neighborhood committees for the defense and welfare of all students.

The first signs of a problem

The story begins last November, when the student in question underwent routine childhood screening for lead poisoning. Authorities including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend routine childhood lead screening, because lead is toxic to the body. It is especially damaging in pregnancy and during the first six years of life. In children, lead can damage the developing brain and nervous system, leading to developmental delays, difficulties with learning, and behavioral issues.

The student in question had a blood lead level that exceeded normal limits, indicating the student was being poisoned from an environmental source. Typical sources of lead include paint, water, soil, and various commercial products like toys and jewelry. With respect to paint, it is worst when chipping paint and paint dust are eaten or inhaled. Children are especially prone to eat paint chips due to natural curiosity, and less commonly due to a compulsive disorder known as pica.

Every US state has requirements for reporting lead screening results to public health authorities. In Milwaukee, all lead screening results must be submitted to MHD. Thus, the student's results came to MHD's attention, and given the student's high blood lead level, MHD began its investigation into the source of the poisoning.

MHD determined with confidence that the student had been poisoned at school. This finding is unusual, as it is far more common that the investigation uncovers a home source of lead poisoning.

The student attends the Golda Meir School. Built in 1890 as Fourth Street School, the building currently serves children in grades 3 through 12. It is one of over 100 buildings in MPS that was built before 1978, the year that lead paint was banned by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) due to its toxic effects.

The situation broke into the public limelight in January, when parents of children at Golda Meir received an email notifying them:

Last week, MHD identified one case of childhood lead poisoning. MHD's investigation discovered that the source likely originated from lead-based paint in the basement bathroom at Golda Meir Lower Campus. MHD is working closely with the impacted family, school leadership, and ... MPS ... administration to address the situation.

The crisis explodes

In response to parents' concerns over the revelation, which was now public in the local media, MHD assessed multiple MPS buildings with the assistance of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS). MHD Commissioner Michael Totoraitis informed then-interim MPS Superintendent Eduardo Galvan and the MPS board of the results in early February.

These results showed "dangerous levels of lead contamination" not only at Golda Meir, but also at another school building. A third building was suspected of contamination, a result that would be confirmed later that month. A fourth building was cleared. Totoraitis urged MPS to improve its detection, monitoring, and mitigation of lead hazards and ordered MPS to submit a lead action plan by March 21. He also notified MPS families and staff in writing of the findings and recommendations.

Daisy Aldape, a parent of a student at the second school with confirmed lead hazards, said:

(My daughter) already had elevated lead levels. I didn't know where it was coming from I thought it was from my old home. But now I see it's between my house and the school so we're going to have to do the testing all over again.

MHD subsequently conducted a formal lead risk assessment at Golda Meir, the largest ever undertaken by the city. The results found extensive lead hazards throughout the entire building. The report stated that every floor and windowsill in the building was "considered a dust lead hazard."

Lead hazards were found in bathrooms, numerous classrooms, the kitchen, the cafeteria, a teachers' lounge, the lobby, and even on the exterior of the building.

From there, the crisis escalated, with additional students at additional schools identified as having been lead poisoned at MPS. To date, seven MPS students have tested positive for lead poisoning where their school is considered a likely source of exposure.

The conditions of at least five schools were so dangerous that MPS was forced to close them, redirecting students and teachers to other school buildings. At least three buildings remain closed, with one school having notified parents that their students will be "redirected" to other schools for the remainder of the school year.

Even when MHD issued clearances for students to return to school, these clearances often were delayed beyond the planned re-opening dates. Last-minute notifications of extended closures caused confusion and angst among students, their families, and teachers.

The MPS website for its Lead Action Plan currently lists 10 school buildings impacted by lead hazards, for which it is providing ongoing updates. It also announced the hiring of The Sigma Group as a contractor to complete additional lead hazard assessments at MPS schools.

The lead contamination was so widespread, and the danger to students so concerning, that MHD and MPS held a special free clinic in March for lead screening of MPS students. As the revelations mounted and the crisis spread to additional schools, since May 20 MHD, MPS, and community healthcare providers including Children's Wisconsin have partnered to hold and schedule ongoing free screenings. The MPS website lists planned screening clinics for children attending specific schools in May and into June.

Response to the crisis

The extent and magnitude of the crisis spurred community members to confront it. In February, parents of Golda Meir school children formed a group called Lead Safe Schools MKE (MKE is a common shorthand for the city following its three-letter airport code). It describes itself as "a parent-led group with a goal of keeping Milwaukee Public Schools free of lead in paint, soil, air, and water."

This group grew to include parents at other schools as the crisis widened. It held a letter-writing event and "community assembly" in April and currently plans to host screenings of two movies—*Lead and Copper* and *Something in the Water*—later this month.

After submitting its draft Lead Action Plan on March 21 to meet an order from the Milwaukee Health Department, MPS released its final Lead Action Plan on April 28. The plan notes that of the 48 schools that have undergone visual lead hazard assessment thus far, 15 schools have deterioration of 50 percent or more of all painted surfaces. Another 30 schools have deterioration of 10 percent to 50 percent of all painted surfaces. These numbers alone signify an extraordinary level of neglect.

Prior to the release of the plan, Lead Safe Schools MKE made several demands. They called for MPS and MHD to publish a timeline for completing lead risk assessments on all MPS buildings built prior to 1978 and another timeline for remediating lead hazards. They also demanded that the MPS School Board hold a special meeting on the lead crisis, which eventually was held, and for MHD to declare a public health emergency.

The MPS Lead Action Plan ended up meeting the demands for timelines on inspection and remediation. It specifies the following actions:

- Visual lead assessments of all buildings serving elementary students and that were constructed before 1978 by September 1

- Public posting of building-specific remediation statuses on a weekly basis beginning May 31
- Stabilization of lead paint hazards in all elementary school buildings constructed before 1950, a total of 54 buildings, by "end of summer"
- Stabilization of lead paint hazards in all elementary school buildings constructed between 1950 and 1978, a total of another 52 buildings, by the end of 2025 calendar year
- Training of all custodial and facilities staff on lead-safe cleaning protocols by October 1

The root cause of the crisis

The widespread lead contamination throughout MPS schools of course begged questions about how and why the situation got so far out of control. The investigations into that issue, some of which were carried out by local media, especially the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* newspaper, identified that MPS had been unable to keep pace with its lead remediation efforts due to chronic, severe funding shortages to schools in the state.

The main culprits are the Democrats—who control the governorship and have ruled Milwaukee for decades—and the MTEA, which has actively restrained educators and parents from opposing the lead poisonings. For its part, the Democratic-controlled state government slashed state aid to Milwaukee schools by \$81 million in 2024–25. Additionally, the Biden-Harris administration allowed federal COVID school funding to expire, from which Wisconsin had received \$2.4 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds.

From this, the Milwaukee school district received \$786.42 million, intended to hire staff, purchase necessary equipment and textbooks, and improve air quality and circulation in classrooms. The collapse of this funding resulted in the district laying off nearly 300 school workers.

The MTEA, which represents approximately 5,600 public education workers, has limited educators' opposition to the lead poisonings to issuing press releases and holding small-scale protests. The MTEA is wholly intertwined with the Democratic Party, and, as with the layoffs of 300 school workers, it will not permit educators to wage an all-out strike or significant labor action out of fear it would provoke a direct confrontation with the Democrats.

The consequences of underfunding MPS

As a result of chronic and accelerated underfunding, under Democratic Party leadership, MPS cut 90 percent of its painting staff in the last three decades, from 54 painters in 1997 to 5 today. The number of buildings to maintain did not change significantly in that period.

Because of the cuts, MPS could no longer hold "guaranteed painting days," where the district assured that painters would arrive to touch up and repair cracked and chipping paint. In past years, each school was guaranteed at least 11 painting days per school year. It is not clear exactly when MPS discontinued the practice altogether.

The *Journal Sentinel* investigation found that school engineers who uncover paint issues are required to enter a work order for remediation. Its investigation found at least one open paint-related work order at most MPS schools, including all seven that up to that point had been found to have lead hazards. Two recent, open work orders were specific about concern for the risk of lead poisoning.

The impact of DOGE

Because MHD has been overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the issues in MPS, struggling to keep up with lead risk assessments and screenings of students, it reached out to the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (CLPPP) at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for help in late March. The response in early April from the CDC was that it could not offer assistance “due to the complete loss” of the CLPPP.

The purge of CLPPP occurred on April 1, when Trump’s Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Robert F. Kennedy Jr. fired thousands of workers and eliminated entire divisions throughout the HHS and its sub-agencies.

Characteristic of the dedication and concern for the public’s welfare of the CDC staff fired, one of CLPPP’s workers volunteered their time to MHD to help. Equally characteristic of the fascistic nature of the Trump administration, many more were too afraid to make such an offer for fear of retaliation. And MHD was afraid to take up the one individual on their offer in part for fear of what might happen to them and in part for consequences to MHD itself.

Making matters worse, DOGE has also launched an assault on the federal Department of Education with the goal of destroying it entirely. That threatens the 20 percent of MPS funding that comes from the federal government. MPS and school districts around the country received a letter from the Department of Education demanding that it eliminate all “illegal DEI” programs or risk losing funding. Wisconsin has joined 18 other states in suing the Trump administration over this letter.

How to fight back

The MPS lead paint crisis is the product of the intensifying crisis of capitalism and several trends that stem from it. First among them is the ruling class clawing back all the gains achieved by workers in the 20th century, including the right to a quality public education as well as the vast improvements in public health such as keeping children safe from lead poisoning.

Furthermore, as noted, the DOGE cuts to the CDC have hamstrung the response to the crisis right when CDC was most needed. The ongoing assault on science and public health begun under the Biden administration and dramatically escalated by President Trump has severely impacted the ability of state and local governments to protect the health of their communities.

This crisis is not a failure or a mistake of the Democratic-controlled local and state governments, but a direct byproduct of their policies. Decades of deindustrialization, attacks on public education and infrastructure, wage cuts, and the relentless assault on democratic rights—under both capitalist parties—have created a situation where students can no longer be safe in what should be a place of security and enrichment: their schools.

These attacks and poisonings will not stop. The Democrats cannot be trusted—as their record clearly demonstrates—and the fascistic Republicans offer no alternative. The unions are tied by a thousand threads to the Democrats and will not mobilize educators and workers to meaningfully address these issues. Therefore, teachers and students must rely on themselves and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union

bureaucracy and both capitalist parties, and fighting to unite with the broader working class across the region and internationally.

These committees should be established at every school, workplace, and neighborhood throughout Milwaukee and across the state. They should be democratically controlled and organize workers and community members to fight for what is necessary: that all students be entitled to high-quality education and safe schools.



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