

Schools rush to test for lead in tap water

Lead

Districts run voluntary checks for toxic metal

STEVE ORR

@SORR1

Local school districts are rushing to test drinking fountains and faucets for the presence of lead, testament to a nationwide surge in concern about the toxic metal.

On Wednesday, Penfield Central School District announced it had shut off several drinking fountains in Cobbles Elementary School after detecting lead in levels above the federal action level.

Penfield joined Brighton, which said last week it had detected excessive lead in fountains or taps in four of its buildings.

Numerous other local districts are now conducting their own voluntary searches for leading in school drinking water.

The schools' sudden hunt for lead marks the first time in a decade there has been attention paid locally to lead in tap water.

The bigger issue locally has been,

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and remains, poisoning of children from exposure to lead paint dust and chips.

A major campaign by governments and nonprofits has reduced the number of Rochester-area young people with elevated levels of lead in their blood by nearly 90 percent over the last dozen years. Still, 139 children in Monroe County were found to meet the traditional lead-poisoned threshold, and 470 more had elevated blood-lead levels.

Nearly all were residents of the city, which has a large stock of old homes in which lead paint remains.

The lead being found now by local schools — like lead that can be found in the tap water that flows from faucets in some homes and businesses — leaches out of lead pipes or the lead solder on the pipes that carry water into and around the structures.

Local drinking water, drawn primarily from Lake Ontario and Hemlock and Canadice Lakes south of Rochester, does not contain appreciable amounts of lead.

Experts here say a simple technique — letting the tap run for 30 to 60 seconds before using it, a practice that

drains pipes of any standing water that might have picked up lead — usually eliminates any potential problem. Still, in light of nationwide concern driven by the discovery that the drinking water in Flint, Michigan, contained high levels of the toxic metal, many school districts are voluntarily checking their supplies and drinking-water suppliers are having to explain their own track records on lead.

» The city of Rochester and the Monroe County Water Authority, which together supply water to 950,000 people and businesses in Monroe and five contiguous counties, have not recorded any exceedances of federal lead rules. As those rules require, both systems sample water from about 50 residential or commercial customers every three years. An exceedance occurs if more than 10 percent of the samples contain lead in excess of the federal action level, which is 15 parts per billion. The water authority has never come close to an exceedance, officials there told the *Democrat and Chronicle* in February. Those officials said they do not own any lead service lines. Such lines, which were commonly used until about 1930, are a source of lead in water.

When the city tests, it usually finds at least a few homes with elevated lead in their tap water, and in 2009 it came within a hair's breadth of violating the federal rule. Officials say they did follow-up testing and found no systemic problem.

The city still has 23,000 solid-lead service lines leading from water mains to the property line.

» There is no legal requirement for schools to test their waters for lead. However, many are choosing to do so. Through Thursday, the local list included the Churchville-Chili, East Irondequoit, Fairport, Gates Chili, Greece, Hilton, Honeoye Falls-Lima, Pittsford, Spencerport, Webster, West Irondequoit and Wheatland-Chili school districts. Brockport Central said its water is sampled for lead by the village of Brockport. Brighton announced last week it had located 62 drinking fountains and taps with elevated lead levels, with the greatest concentration being 480 parts per billion in a highschool fountain. Eight water sources where the problem persisted after flushing were taken out of service, the district said. The district has been detecting lead in its water for several years, but did not make it public until last week.

Penfield said Wednesday it shut off several sources in Cobble Elementary School where excessive lead was found, with the highest value detected being 36 parts per billion. The district said it should have results on other buildings within a week.

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said recently he would press for \$100 million in federal aid to help schools testing their water for lead.

» In 2004, more than 1,000 water sources were tested for lead in Rochester City School District buildings. The testing, sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, found 80 sources with elevated lead. After the fixtures and supply lines were replaced at those locations, 35 fountains or taps still had elevated lead. The district pledged to either replace all the plumbing for those sources or to shut them down, according to information supplied by the school district.

At present the city district, which has more students and more old buildings than any of the suburban districts, does not have an on-going program to test water for lead and has not announced any plans for testing. A district spokeswoman said the city of Rochester owns the school buildings and has responsibility for the water. A city spokeswoman did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The district does have an active program to prevent the release of leadpaint dust and chips and to monitor school buildings for those materials. It reports on these efforts annually to the school board.

In addition, lead paint and any pipes containing lead are being removed and replaced in buildings that receive top-to-bottom overhauls as part of Rochester's \$1.3 billion school modernization program, according to Thomas Richards, the former mayor who chairs an appointed board that oversees the modernization program.

SORR@Gannett.com