

Water tests miss problem pipes in schools

Loophole prevents testing of many school systems

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Ithaca pediatrician Marguerite Uphoff remembers a time when leaded gasoline burned inside cars, lead-based paint covered bedroom walls, and school districts installed pipes with lead solder to deliver drinking water for children.

“There’s no question that lead is a neurotoxin, and even at low blood-lead levels, it has the potential to affect development, behavior and learning ability,” she said.

In 2016, car engines run on unleaded gas, and the lead-based paint can be detected easily and removed. Lead pipes and lead solder, however, are more expensive to replace and often harder to find. While some regulations exist to protect people from lead in drinking water, recent tests at local schools reveal a gap in the rules designed to protect children.

Drinking fountains, classroom faucets or cafeteria tap water have been contaminated by lead, generally in the pipes or fixtures in districts across the region, but many schools found out only after community concerns led to testing. Why? Schools on municipal water systems aren’t required to test the water the way those on well water or other non-municipal systems are.

“We know what we need to do, and that’s trying to figure out how to get the lead out of the water,” Uphoff said.

Because municipal water systems are required to test their water, the state Department of Health and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency don’t require districts to also test. But both agencies also point out that lead contamination in a school’s water typically comes from the building’s plumbing, which wouldn’t show up in system testing.

Drinking water typically isn’t contaminated with lead when it leaves the treatment plant. The toxic metal leaches out when water contacts lead pipes and lead solder, according to the state health department and EPA. That was how Flint, Michigan, ended up with so many problems: The city failed to treat the water with anti-corrosives, which meant even more lead leached out of the pipes and solder than typical.

At least two state legislators in the region want to close that gap.

New regulations sought

Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, D-Endwell, said she was surprised to learn that schools using municipal water aren’t already required to test for lead. “The fact that someone saw fit to end the use of lead piping and lead solder in schools after (1986) obviously indicated that there was a concern for lead in water,” Lupardo said. She has proposed legislation requiring drinking water testing at all New York state schools.

Assemblywoman Barbaba Lifton, D-Ithaca, said she has two grandchildren in the Ithaca City School District. Elevated lead levels have been identified in each of the district’s 12 schools. “I share the concern of my constituents,” she said. “I’m trying to find out what the appropriate state role in this — in terms of new state

law, perhaps, and a stronger state role in terms of making sure local municipalities, school districts and perhaps other entities are tracking this issue.” On Thursday, Lifton announced she was introducing legislation requiring each water district to test for lead in all the schools and day care sites it serves, and that parents would receive written notification if the lead levels are above 15 parts per billion.

“There are children in (buildings) other than schools, and we need to consider the health of all our children,” she said. It’s a state responsibility to make sure all New Yorkers have clean water to drink, and it’s the state’s responsibility to pay for such testing and necessary remediation, she added. “There are different approaches to legislation,” Lupardo said. “My bill directs the state education department, in consultation with the department of health, to come up with an approach that works for everyone.” Lupardo added that she would look to federal or state resources if testing is cost-prohibitive for schools. U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., also weighed in on lead testing in state schools. Schumer announced last week he would seek to create a \$100 million federal grant program through the EPA to help school districts across the country test their drinking water for potential lead contamination.

Schools are strapped for cash and don’t need an unfunded mandate on testing water for lead, Schumer said. The first step is getting money for schools to identify lead problems in drinking water, and there are no plans at this point to require water testing at schools that use municipal water, he added. “We don’t want to have an unfunded mandate, so once the money is here, that’s a step we would consider, but right now, we want to get this bill passed first,” he said.

Existing regulations

Regulatory oversight is playing out at schools in the Ithaca, Binghamton and Elmira areas, and throughout the country.

School district officials plugged water sources after voluntary lead testing showed unsafe lead concentrations at 10 Ithaca City School District buildings, two buildings in the Trumansburg Central School District, and four Binghamton City School District buildings.

After the lead contamination was reported, nearby school districts, including Corning-Painted Post School District and other districts in the Elmira region, committed to test their water for lead.

Though they agreed to an off-the-record interview with Gannett Central New York Media Group, state health department officials were unwilling to comment on the record beyond this statement: “Department of Health does not have legal jurisdiction over interior water fixtures in school buildings,” agency spokesman James Plastiras said in an email. “The issue of lead contamination in older infrastructure has been around for decades, and school districts have the responsibility to fix issues related to lead in drinking water in their buildings.” Along with no state mandates, there is no federal law requiring drinking-water testing in schools and child care facilities, except for those that have their own water supply, according to EPA spokesman John Martin.

“The primary business of schools is education, and not operating and maintaining a public water system,” Martin said in an email. The EPA and states are working together to look at practices or equipment, which could be causing increases in lead, he added. No EPA officials were available for telephone interviews, Martin said.

Mitigating risk

Historically, paint and leaded gasoline have been far greater lead sources than water, and blood lead levels in

children have steadily decreased, according to Uphoff, the Ithaca pediatrician.

In the 1970s, it wasn't uncommon for pediatricians to see lead poisoning cases where children had blood lead levels greater than or equal to 45 micrograms per deciliter, according to the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability. Experts now use a reference level of 5 micrograms per deciliter to identify children younger than 6 years old with high blood lead levels, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC reports that children with blood lead levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter are in the top 97 percentile of children when tested for lead in their blood. No safe blood lead level in children has been identified, according to the CDC website. "As lead levels have come down, the lead in water becomes more important because we've been reducing other sources consciously, although we still have a lot of (sources) in the community," Uphoff said. The state health department recommends letting water run for 15 to 30 seconds before drinking, and let water get cold.

Binghamton University pediatric nurse practitioner Susan Terwilliger recommended that parents make sure homes are lead free, and feed children foods that are rich in calcium and iron. The two nutrients block lead absorption into the body, she said. "Our kids, if they have a problem with lead, it's usually from lead paint in older homes," Terwilliger said. Dirt even can contain lead paint chips, Terwilliger added. Have children wash their hands before eating, she said.

"The CDC really recommends that you have sandboxes for kids, and don't let them play in the dirt anymore, and that just seems so natural, to play in dirt," she said. Children 6 years old and younger are most susceptible to the effects of lead, which can affect almost every organ and system in a person's body, according to the EPA.

Children absorb lead more readily than adults and excrete it more slowly, Uphoff added.

Lead poisoning damages growing cells and tissues, and it can cause behavior and learning problems, lower IQ, slowed growth, hearing problems and anemia. "Lead is not good; lead is a neurotoxin, and it doesn't do good things for development," Uphoff said. "Children who ingest significant quantities of lead are at risk for developmental problems."

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Drinking fountains at Ithaca High School.

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MARGUERITE UPHOFF

ITHACA PEDIATRICIAN