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Mold forces school to close classrooms

Some parents say Lawrenceburg High was slow to react

By Michael D. Clark
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LAWRENCEBURG — High levels of toxic mold prompted Lawrenceburg High School officials to close off a classroom Tuesday, and more rooms will be empty today. The school is the latest in a string of Tristate schools with mold problems this year. Four of the five classrooms tested in the Indiana high school have mold infestation exceeding suggested safety guidelines from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, according to laboratory results.



Anthony Dietrich, Lawrenceburg High School principal, gets his first look at a report on mold in the school. (Glenn Hartong photo) | [ZOOM](#) |

In all, tests identified more than a dozen types of mold, with the one posing the most immediate health concern identified as *stachybotrys chartarum*. The removal of students from one classroom, where tests revealed potentially dangerous toxic mold, came shortly after school officials learned of the test results from the *Enquirer*, which had obtained laboratory documents. The tests had been ordered by the Dearborn County Health Department and were completed Saturday, but as of Tuesday the results had not been passed on to Lawrenceburg High School officials.

Some parents say they have complained for months that mold underneath peeling wallpaper in some of the high school classrooms was making some students ill. But high school officials contend there was no serious health hazard, and that the closing of four classrooms is merely a precaution. Herbert Layman, lab director for U.S. Micro-Solutions Inc., in Greensburg, Pa., which conducted the testing at the request of the county health department, described the mold levels in the four classrooms as a “potential health hazard” in his April 20 report. “They should keep the students out,” Mr. Layman said of the classrooms that were found to have high mold levels. “And they should go in there and investigate the entire school right now.”

“Only one in five students may react to the mold, but that one person's reaction may be very violent and they could get very sick,” he said. Symptoms of exposure to airborne mold spores can duplicate allergic and asthmatic responses, or in some cases expand into severe and chronic illnesses, such as blinding headaches, shortness of breath, burning eyes, sinus and respiratory infections, rashes, severe itching, dizziness, memory loss and fatigue.

In rare cases some toxic molds can cause pulmonary fibrosis, which can eventually kill those inhaling the microscopic mold spores by choking off lung capacity.

Lawrenceburg parent Donna Thacker said she has complained for months to school officials and that since spring 2000 her daughter has been sickened by mold spores from peeling wallpaper when she is in some classrooms. "My daughter has had numerous sinus types of illnesses," she said. "Sometimes she would come home feeling so ill and she would have a rash on her upper arms." Lawrenceburg Superintendent Todd Rudnick refused to comment.

High School Principal Anthony Dietrich said he was surprised that county health officials did not notify him as soon as the mold test results were available Saturday, but added that the school will follow the health department's recommendations. Those recommendations, however, may not be ready until the end of this week, said John Grace, environmental health specialist for the department.

Mr. Grace said he intends to meet with his supervisor, Dr. Gary Scudder, top health officer of the county, to draft a letter regarding the test results. He said he expects the letter to be completed by the end of the week. "I don't expect a few more days will make a difference," Mr. Grace said. "If you go closing the school down it will cause more panic and alarm." Dr. Scudder declined to comment. Despite the initial positive tests for toxic mold, Mr. Grace said there are currently no plans for testing of more classrooms in the high school, which houses more than 500 students. Ms. Thacker described the health department's response to the test results as "horrific." "They have already delayed long enough. Those students could be in danger," she said. Mold infestation has become a familiar problem this year in schools throughout Greater Cincinnati. Officials from Sycamore and Milford school districts recently ordered buildings closed temporarily after discovering mold problems.

Meanwhile, some parents at Robert E. Lucas Intermediate School accuse Princeton school district officials of knowingly leaving a water-damaged carpet in a classroom for almost a year after the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health advised them to remove it. Princeton official's dispute claims of mold infestation but are conducting further air-quality testing.