

School Employees Claim Mold Caused Health Problems

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Another employee of the Rapides Parish School Board claims to be suffering from respiratory problems caused by mold at the Rapides Motivational Center on Vance Avenue. Paula Durham has filed the second lawsuit against the school system, claiming mold at that school has enflamed her asthma and left her with debilitating breathing disorders.

Durham, a teacher's aide for five years, said her room had a moldy, musty odor that she complained about to janitors and administrators to no avail. Her room was located right next to the office of the school's former secretary, Peggy Bergeron, who filed a similar lawsuit last summer after a moldy ceiling tile fell directly onto her desk. Both have hired former Rapides Superintendent Betty Cox as their lawyer and both have since been transferred to different schools.

The school has been tested for mold and toxic mold, but the results won't be available until the trials.

It's everywhere

These are not the first complaints about mold in Rapides Parish schools. District maintenance officials say while there is no way to get rid of it all, they are taking every complaint seriously and are doing more than enough to keep it under control. Mold was a problem at Brame Middle School in September, but Principal Wally Fall was pleased that workers promptly changed the chiller system to get mildew out and alleviate mold-making wetness.

Last December, complaints of high humidity led to a discovery of mold at Buckeye High School and Hayden R. Lawrence Middle School. District facilities director Randy Patterson said the issue is resolved and the school system is now working to get money back from the architects who recently refurbished the schools.

Oak Hill High School parents also complained of leaky wet conditions earlier this year. "The odor was really bad," said Deidra Burmann, a parent of an Oak Hill second-grader. "It smelled musty, like an old house that had been closed up." But she said since the new roof was completed recently, conditions have improved.

Roy Rachal, district coordinator of risk management, said mold is everywhere, but dangerous toxic mold has only been found at Mary Goff Elementary in the spring of 2002. Rachal, who is certified in mold abatement, explained the main

mold considered toxic is stachybotrous, but only if it is dried and disrupted, causing it to go airborne.

A janitor cleaning an area accidentally disrupted a colony of stachybotrous spores in Mary Goff. Within days, Rachal had tested the area, found toxic mold and quarantined the premises with negative air pressure to keep any fumes from passing through. The project cost the district \$93,000.

A small amount of stagnant stachybotrys was discovered at North Bayou Rapides Elementary School in 2002. Even though private contractors have declared the school has safe air quality, teachers aren't convinced. "The carpet has so much mold, I'm scared to touch it," said teacher Tracy Bock. "When I turn on the air conditioning, my kids complain that it smells so bad. They are sneezing and coughing, the ones with asthma are wheezing."

Humidity ills

The Environmental Protection Agency claims one of the biggest causes of poor indoor air quality is when not enough "fresh air" from outside is let indoors. However, that's a much different story in Louisiana, Rachal said.

When more of Louisiana's humid, mold-ridden outside air is brought into a school, the conditions worsen, he said. He said every time someone complains of too much humidity or mold in the schools, he conducts an air quality test that tells him how many mold spores are found per cubic meter of air inside and outside.

"Almost every instance that our environmentalists have tested the air, the air inside is cleaner than the outside air," he said. "That means it's more dangerous to breathe the air outside." However, he said, "If we have any reason to be concerned, I'll make the recommendation to shut a school down immediately like we did at Mary Goff."

Patterson said the school district has stepped up maintenance to prevent water intrusion through seasonal roof inspections, slowly upgrading heating and air conditioning systems, and training janitors to be on the lookout.

"I guarantee there aren't many school systems doing what we are proactively to deal with this ... to ensure our students, faculty and visitors a safe environment," Rachal said. "...But we don't just go out and randomly test everything for mold. It is not cost efficient."