



Help Your Favorite Area Non-Profit With GRANT

Boston schools moved to fix lead in water — and now it's worse

E-MAIL

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

GOOGLE

LINKEDIN

14



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Water pipes were replaced and new water fountains were installed at the recently renovated Fenway High School.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 29, 2016

The Boston School Department has hit a snag in its efforts to restore tap water at school drinking fountains, after testing found high levels of harmful lead in the water coming from some newly installed fountains.

School officials recently launched a \$300,000 project to repair and upgrade plumbing so the fountain water could be restored at six buildings. But the fountains have not been used because of the worrisome tests.

Officials are investigating the cause of the contamination and how to fix it.

The officials have been hoping for substantial savings by turning fountains back on and dropping a costly reliance on bottled water. The district expects to spend \$415,000 this school year to provide bottled water in two-thirds of schools citywide to keep children safe from lead in the water.

The school district launched the first phase of a plan last year to repair old plumbing and to install new fountains and bottle-filling stations, starting with the Curley K-8 School, which has two buildings in Jamaica Plain; Boston Green Academy and Another Course to College housed together in Brighton; as well as the Lee K-8 School, Mather Elementary School, and the Trotter Innovation School, in Dorchester.

Some Boston school tap water hasn't been tested for lead in years

Chart: Lead test results for Boston schools since 2010

Chart: Which Boston schools use



bottled water vs. tap water

What parents need to know about lead exposure

The facilities were selected for the pilot program because prior tests indicated lead levels that were below state and federal standards, school officials said.

However, testing conducted in recent months has shown elevated lead levels in the water bubbling up from some of the new fountains.

Tests at five of the buildings have come back. At four of the buildings, at least one sample tested for lead levels above 15 parts per billion, the state standard. Elevated lead levels were found in nine of 36 samples taken at the schools.

“BPS is investigating why some lead levels rose after the water fountains were installed,” Richard Weir, spokesman for the School Department, said in a statement. “Until BPS is able to determine the cause of the increased lead levels in some of the new fountains — and we feel confident that we can provide drinking water that meets or exceeds state and federal standards — none of the new water fountains . . . will be activated.”

“Some of these preliminary test results were not entirely unexpected due to the fact that these schools have been offline [using bottled water] for an extended period of time and some of their pipes have been dormant,” he added. “As part of a pilot program, we anticipated that additional steps might have to be taken.”

The district may end up spending more than the \$300,000 it budgeted as it tries to fix whatever is causing the high lead levels, he said.

The district continues to test lead levels in the tap water at the other 86 school buildings that are

using bottled water, in the hope that eventually improvements will allow them to bring all of the drinking fountains back on line.

But data from that testing shows that there's good reason for fountains at those schools to be shut off. Elevated lead levels were found in 154 of the 639 samples taken at schools using bottled water since 2013.

(The system's other 37 schools use tap water because past testing found it to be safe. Officials have said recently they are planning to step up testing in the future to make sure the water is still safe.)

The School Department has seen success in restoring fountains for use in one school building. Fenway High School moved into a building after a major renovation that cost about \$10 million. The project included replacing water pipes. School officials said that tests of the tap water there have shown acceptable lead levels.

Children are particularly vulnerable when it comes to lead. Exposure has been linked to IQ deficits, shortened attention spans, behavioral problems, hearing damage, stunted growth, and lowered birth weight.

The water flowing through water mains is virtually lead-free, officials say. Problems arise when the service line, which connects the main in the street to the building, is made of lead, or when there are lead-based components in a building's plumbing, or when both issues exist.

Older buildings are more likely to have lead issues. Most Boston schools were built before the 1950s.

Restoring water for drinking at schools would be an expensive process in the short term, but in the long run it would be a significantly cheaper alternative than supplying bottled water, officials said. The process is expected to take years because the work can be time-consuming, disruptive, and because the department has limited funding.

City Councilors Anissa Essaibi-George and Andrea Campbell called this week for a hearing about the district's spending on bottled water.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh said that he remained committed to the plan to restore water fountains at all schools citywide, and that the district's 10-year facilities master plan, which is being developed, would "provide a strategic framework for facilities investments to improve matters such as these."

“Safe drinking water is essential to our children’s health and we continue to be committed to ensuring that students have access to clean water within all of our schools,” Walsh said in a statement.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).

Get [Today’s Headlines](#) from the Globe in your inbox:

[Privacy Policy](#)

SHOW 14 COMMENTS

Stay updated, right in your news feed.

Top 10 Trending Articles

Most Viewed

Most Commented

Most Shared

Patriots release Dominique Easley

Trump would be a disaster, but Cruz would be apocalyptic

‘The Sisterhood of the Traveling Prom Dress’

Governor Baker halts speech under onslaught of boos at LG...

Baker, Walsh to launch anti-marijuana campaign

ClassPass raises prices and local fitness buffs fume

Learn more

Bad deals in 2014 continue to haunt Red Sox

[SUBSCRIBE](#) [BOSTON GLOBE INSIDERS](#) [EPAPER EDITION](#) [NEWS IN EDUCATION](#)

Once he hit the road to NBA, Jae Crowder never ran out of ...

[MY ACCOUNT](#)

[LOGOUT](#)

Vermont immigrant investor program operated Ponzi-like s...

[MANAGE MY ACCOUNT](#)

[DOWNLOAD CUSTOMER SERVICE APP](#)

Ask Nick: Are Red Sox rushing Christian Vazquez back too s...

[CONTACT](#)

[HELP](#)

[FAQS](#)

[GLOBE NEWSROOM](#)

[ADVERTISE](#)

SOCIAL

[FACEBOOK](#)

[TWITTER](#)

[GOOGLE+](#)

MORE

[ARCHIVES](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)

[TERMS OF PURCHASE](#)

[YOUR AD CHOICES](#)

[WORK AT BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA](#)

© 2016 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC
