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What you should know about lead in drinking fountains at some Boston schools

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Have high lead levels been found in the water at my child's school?

In Boston, most schools — 91 of them — have had their drinking fountains shut off for years and have instead offered bottled water because of concerns about lead.

Thirty-eight schools still use fountains because earlier tests had showed those facilities to have acceptable lead levels in water.

(To see which school buildings use bottled water and which still use tap water, click [here](#).)

But a new wave of testing in recent weeks at those 38 schools turned up high lead levels at some fountains at the following four school buildings:

- Boston Latin Academy in Dorchester
- Richard J. Murphy K-8 School in Dorchester
- Thomas J. Kenny Elementary School in Dorchester
- Rafael Hernandez K-8 School in Roxbury

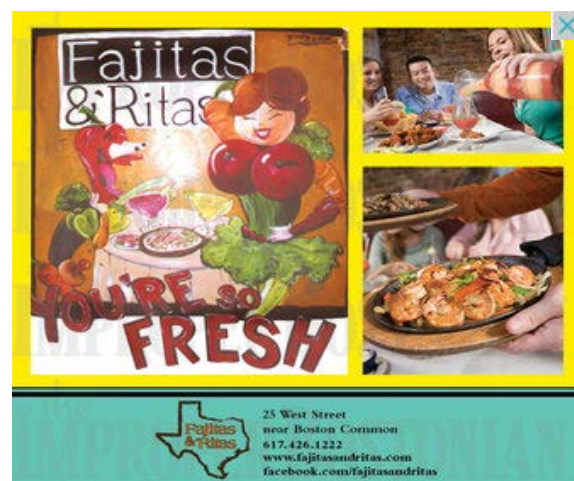
(For more information about the testing results at those four schools, click [here](#) and [here](#).)

Testing done in past years turned up high lead levels in water from faucets or fountains at three other schools:

- The Haley Elementary School in Roslindale (2015)
- The Lee Academy Pilot School in Dorchester (2013)
- The Chittick Elementary School in Mattapan (2011)

(For more information about the testing results at those three schools, click [here](#).)

What is the school department doing to address lead concerns?



The school department says it has shut off the affected fountains at the four schools where high lead levels were recently discovered and has increased access to bottled water at those buildings.

The district also plans to step up testing. Previously, it had only done enough testing to meet regulatory requirements — testing two school buildings per year.

Now, school officials say that beginning this year, they will test all buildings at least once annually.

What's more, at schools where food is prepared on-site (some schools receive pre-prepared meals from an outside vendor), cafeteria workers conduct a two-minute, cold-water flush every morning before using the water, officials said.

School officials have said the district has a longstanding policy of notifying families of health and safety issues, including whether high lead levels are found in water.

Why not just switch all schools to bottled water?

Bottled water costs significantly more than tap water.

The district recently said it expected to spend about \$415,000 on bottled water this school year.

Boston has been taking steps to try to replace fountains and old plumbing at school buildings.

But a recently launched \$300,000 pilot program to restore drinking water at six schools [hit a snag](#) when tests after repairs were made showed elevated lead levels at fountains that had previously tested to have acceptable lead levels.

School officials have said they are investigating the cause and will not activate the fountains until they are sure the water is safe.

The district [has also decided to hold off](#) for now, on a plan to try to restore fountains at more schools so it can come up with a more detailed plan.

How does lead get into the water?

While significant progress has been made overall in reducing lead levels in US water supplies in recent decades, contamination still happens.

Water is typically virtually lead-free when it leaves reservoirs on its way into communities and as it travels through mains, which are typically made of concrete, iron, or steel.

But lead can leach into water as it flows through narrower, lead pipes called service lines that connect mains to some buildings. Interior pipes and plumbing can also be made of lead.

[Lead service lines](#) and plumbing are most common in older buildings. The use of lead service lines in Massachusetts stopped largely by the 1940s, officials believe. And the use of lead solder in interior plumbing was banned in 1986.

Still, faucets made through 2013 may contain enough lead to contribute to elevated lead levels in water.

Why is there concern about lead in water?

Children can be seriously harmed by lead.

Exposure has been linked to IQ deficits, shortened attention spans, behavioral problems, hearing damage, stunted growth, and lowered birth weight.

Researchers in recent years have found that even low levels of lead exposure can cause adverse health effects. New research has found that no amount of lead is safe.

(For more details on the risks of lead exposure, click [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

Why is lead back in the news?

Concern over lead contamination has risen in the wake of the crisis in Flint, Mich., where the city's water was recently found to be contaminated with high concentrations of the toxic chemical.

The news has prompted [water systems](#) and [schools](#) around the country to look into the issue, sometimes unearthing serious problems.


Officials in [Massachusetts](#) this week announced they have earmarked \$2 million to test for lead in drinking water at public schools statewide.

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