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Schools in 20 Mass. districts had high lead levels in water

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SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF JUNE 06, 2016

Water testing conducted in the past two years in 293 schools and early education centers in Massachusetts found 20 schools with lead levels above regulatory limits, according to data provided state regulators.

The schools were located in: Arlington, Boston, Brewster, Brookline, Burlington, Granby, Halifax, Hopedale, Newton, Northbridge, Pembroke, Reading, Royalston, Sharon, South Hadley, Sterling, Swansea, Wales, Weymouth, and Winthrop.

The tests looked at only a small slice of the 7,000 schools and early education centers in the state's 351 cities and towns. The state Department of Environmental Protection said many were not required to do testing during the time period and test results for others were not available because instead of submitting their results electronically, they filed them on paper and the records are kept in regional offices scattered across the state.



The data also does not include testing that schools may be doing beyond what's needed to fulfill state requirements. Amid concern sparked by the water crisis in Flint, Mich., some area communities, including [Boston](#), [Newton](#), and [Natick](#), recently stepped up testing, making headlines when some tests found high lead levels.

Expert Yanna Lambrinidou said it's likely that there are many schools with problems.

Newton	Ward Elementary	Faucet	290	9/4/14
Hopedale	Stepping Stones	Upper Sink	160	9/24/14
Granby	Granby Jr Sr High And East Meadow School	East Meadow Rm 10 Sink - Valved Off	80	10/17/16
Swansea	J. Case High School	Fountain	65	9/23/15
Weymouth	Academy Ave School	Bubler Cafe	58	6/2/14
Pensacola	Hobemock Elem. School	Kitchen	57	9/2/14
Welles	Welles Elementary School	Grade 1 Sink	57	8/22/13
		Hi-Rm 213 Faucet	40	1/24/16
		Faucet	38.2	8/21/14

Chart: Lead test results for Mass. schools since

2014

Data from the state Department of Environmental Protection show the results of testing done at 293 different schools and early education centers across 114 cities and towns.

“There’s really no reason not to believe that problems in schools are widespread and appearing in every state in this country,” said Lambrinidou, an affiliate faculty member in the Science and Technology in Society program at Virginia Tech.

She said schools can be trouble spots when it comes to lead in water because some buildings are old and the nature of water use at schools typically means that water sits in pipes for long periods — like weekends and school vacations — which can allow lead to build up.



What’s more, schools serve a vulnerable population.

“This is a problem that we are systematically neglecting as a society,” said Lambrinidou. “We have really dropped the ball on this one.”

Ed Coletta, a DEP spokesman, said officials there believe, and available data suggests, that high lead levels are not a problem at most schools in Massachusetts. But the state is rolling out [a \\$2 million program](#) to help schools do more testing to better understand the scope of the issue.

“We want to make sure that any schools that are at, or over, the action level know about it and are able to address it in a timely manner,” he said. “The idea is to get to those schools that haven’t done a lot of testing to this point, so we’re certainly prioritizing that.”

The US Environmental Protection Agency [recommends](#) that schools remove water sources where the lead concentration exceeds 20 parts per billion. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental

Protection says it holds water in schools to a stricter standard: 15 parts per billion.

A total of 1,009 samples were tested from the 293 schools and early education centers. Most of the samples were collected in 2014 or 2015.

The overwhelming majority of samples — 983 — had acceptable levels of lead, according to the state standard. (Still, in 101 of those samples, lead levels were detected that were higher than those allowed in bottled water, 5 parts per billion.)

The highest lead levels were found in September 2014, at a faucet at the Ward Elementary School in Newton.

The water there had a lead concentration of 230 parts per billion.

Josh Morse, Newton's public buildings commissioner, said that the elevated sample at the Ward school was drawn from a kitchen sink that was not used for food preparation or for drinking. And water tested from other taps around the building was "well within limits," he said. Still, the sink in question and all of the pipes and plumbing that bring water to it have been replaced recently and the city plans to retest the water soon, Morse said.

In recent weeks, a new round of testing found high levels at a different elementary school in Newton, causing concern.

The [federal government recommends](#), but does not require, testing of water in schools, except for the relatively small number of cases in which a school, often in a rural area, is considered to be its own public water system, meaning it uses its own water source, such as a well. That means about 9 in every 10 schools in the US are not required by the federal government to conduct lead testing, the [Associated Press recently found](#).

State and local governments can establish their own rules, however.

[Massachusetts law](#) requires each public water system (each town and city typically has its own system) to periodically collect samples from at least two water sources inside at least two different schools or early education facilities, selected on a rotating basis. The testing periods vary from every six months to every three years.

Lambrinidou said that Massachusetts' testing requirements do not go far enough and occasionally sampling a couple of fountains in a fraction of a school system's buildings may actually give a false sense of confidence about the safety of water at schools.

"I think in some ways we might be doing ourselves a disservice by not doing the sampling comprehensively and correctly and then pumping out a message that the schools are being monitored," she said.

Water in schools across the country should be tested for lead much more regularly, Lambrinidou said.

Elevated lead levels have also been found at [schools around the country](#), particularly in recent months amid heightened scrutiny in the wake of the water crisis in Flint, Mich.

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