



High lead levels found more than 160 school buildings in Mass.

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By Matt Rocheleau and Travis Andersen

GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 16, 2016

Water tests conducted at about 300 public school buildings in Massachusetts this year show that more than half had at least one sample with lead levels above regulatory limits, state officials announced on Tuesday.

Steps are being taken to address the problems found in the 164 school buildings by flushing pipes,

shutting off drinking fountains or taps, and making long-term plumbing repairs, officials said.

“When schools identify problem fixtures, they are quickly taking steps to fix the problem and providing timely updates to their students, families, staff and community,” Martin Suuberg, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, said in a statement.

The tests, part of an ongoing water analysis in public school buildings, were conducted primarily on drinking water and water used in the preparation of food. A small number of samples may have been taken from taps used for hand washing, officials said.

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The state has also been testing copper levels in school water. The bulk of the approximately 300 buildings tested had elevated levels of either copper or lead. Just 73 did not have elevated levels of either.

A clean-water advocate said she is concerned about high lead levels in school buildings, but said she is confident school districts are taking appropriate steps to keep children safe.

“By the time parents are hearing of these results, the schools have eliminated the exposure,” said Becky Smith, the Massachusetts campaign director for Clean Water Action, a nonprofit advocacy group. “Parents should feel the water is safe to drink.”

The water sampling was done through [a \\$2 million program](#) the state launched this past spring in the wake of

concerns generated by the crisis in Flint, Mich., where high lead levels contaminated the city's drinking water.

Some testing of Massachusetts schools began in the late spring and over the summer, and the program intensified around the start of the school year, said Ed Coletta, a spokesman for MassDEP, which is overseeing the testing.

On Tuesday, state officials announced that an additional \$750,000 from the Massachusetts Clean Water Trust is being made available to continue testing water in public schools. The money is in addition to \$2 million in funding from the trust already approved in spring.

Governor Charlie Baker, in a statement, said that "ensuring every water tap and fountain is properly tested expeditiously is an important priority for our administration, the more than 900 schools, and the thousands of students attending them."

Tom Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, said in an e-mail that members are taking the water issue seriously.

"They completely understand that a paramount responsibility is the safety and well being of our students," Scott wrote, adding that "most districts have already provided transparency with the public and taking action steps to shut down access to water sources which students have access."

In Lawrence and Quincy, where school buildings showed high lead levels, steps already are underway to address the issue, school officials said.

Christopher Markuns, a spokesman for Lawrence schools, said elevated lead levels were found in about 80 of more than 1,000 samples taken districtwide. The state found elevated levels of lead or copper at 12 schools in Lawrence.

"None of these were in use as drinking water this year, and remediation plans or shut-offs are in place," Markuns said in an e-mail.



After samplings in the fall turned up elevated levels, the district flushed water systems at the schools, took fixtures off-line, and posted “hand washing only” signs at some faucets and provided bottled water at some locations, state officials said.

Quincy School Superintendent Richard DeCristofaro said staff, students, and families at the affected schools were notified of the test results earlier this month, and that officials are taking safety measures in response to the findings.

Those measures include shutting off all affected water fountains and sinks until they can be repaired and providing water coolers in the affected buildings to ensure students and staff have access to safe drinking water.

School officials began looking into the matter last summer in collaboration with the state, and informed parents in August that Quincy would be participating in the testing.

The state environmental department has [posted](#) statewide [results](#) of the water sampling in a spreadsheet on its website and says it plans to update that data on a weekly basis.

That data appeared to be a portion of all the testing that has been done at Massachusetts schools so far and did not include any results for Boston, where elevated lead levels were recently discovered in several school buildings.

Data posted as of Tuesday evening showed results for 6,396 samples for lead testing.


Out of that total, 671 samples, or about 10 percent, exceeded the state limit for lead in school drinking water of 15 parts per billion.

Some were just barely over that limit, but other readings came back much higher.

Officials said they expect to complete water sampling and technical assistance for all 930 public school buildings in the program by January.

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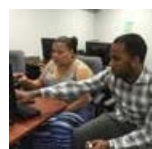
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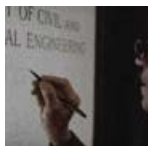
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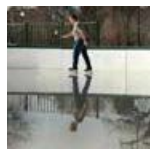
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