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PCB contamination shuts down Ben Franklin School

By Art Cusano



Photo by Art Cusano

Ben Franklin Elementary School was closed over the weekend in order to have PCBs removed.

Benjamin Franklin Elementary School was shut down Friday after a test by the Westchester County Health Department found slightly elevated levels of PCBs.

Two doorways of the school were tested by the health department in June, with one of the areas showing elevated PCB levels.

According to Caren Halbfinger, the spokesman for the Westchester Health Department, a Yorktown resident alerted them to the possible contamination on May 7. The department did not conduct tests at the school until June 26.

School district officials said they had provided documentation to the health department stating that the site was initially tested in February and was declared "clean."

Results from the health department's tests were received on July 18 and one of the tests indicated slightly elevated levels. The school was closed hours later and the Yorktown summer camp that was being held at the school was moved to nearby Copper Beech Middle School. A licensed contractor was at the school on Saturday to clean the area.

"We have acted immediately to begin a cleanup of the area in question," said Raymond Morningstar, Lakeland's superintendent for business. "We are working closely with the health department to remedy the situation."

The door area in question was one of 17 doors that were being replaced in the building. According to Morningstar, PCB/Asbestos abatement was conducted in February before the work was begun. The caulk was tested and came back clean. He said that the work did not begin again until April, which was the next school vacation.

"Everything should have been fine," said Morningstar.

Morningstar said that when he received notice of the complaint Lefkowitz filed in May, he provided the health department with the results of the tests conducted in February. He said that the workers at the site that Lefkowitz spoke to were not instructed to answer questions from citizens.

As an additional precaution, said Morningstar, the district decided to have the area tested a second time. The Health Department also conducted tests. The results were received on Friday, and district officials acted immediately, he said.

A cleanup was conducted by the company EMC on Saturday, and Quest Labs — the same company that performed the original tests in February — performed additional tests on Monday. Morningstar expects the results of those tests in the next few days.

Morningstar said that he is not sure what caused the increase in PCBs, but that one of the workers may have hit brick while working.

According to Health Department Standards, PCBs must not exceed more than 1 microgram per 100 centimeters. The doorway tested at 1.8 microgram per 100 centimeters.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, an area is not considered contaminated unless it reads higher than 100 micrograms per 100 centimeters.

The New York State Department of Education did not have guidelines in place until last month directing schools on how to deal with PCBs, Morningstar said. The guidelines were only written for asbestos abatement.

The man who originally reported the contamination wants to know why it took so long to get the testing done. Daniel Lefkowitz, the Yorktown resident who alerted the DEC and the health department, said there is no way the testing process should have taken so long. Lefkowitz has some experience when it comes to PCBs. He was responsible for finding PCBs in the caulking at French Hill Elementary school in 2004 that led to massive renovations of the building and the excavation of contaminated soil that cost the district \$400,000 for remediation. Lefkowitz has created the Web site PCBinschools.org to help educate the public about the hazards of PCBs in older schools.

"I just happened to be at the school one day and I saw a contractor was replacing exterior doors of the school," he said. "I noticed that they weren't doing any abatement and I asked them why. They said they just let the dust fall and then clean it up."

Lefkowitz said the caulking in the building was known to contain PCBs and that proper caution was not taken.

Lefkowitz said caulking is known to contaminate masonry and the work being done by the contractor to enlarge the doorway was releasing particles into the air.

"They were just grinding away on the masonry," he said.

Lefkowitz also worried that the work was releasing silica, fine crystal found in masonry, into the air. Silica is a known carcinogen.

Lefkowitz said the blame for the mishap can be shared by many.

"There was failure on every level," Lefkowitz said.

Lefkowitz points to a letter from William A. Moore, hazardous waste inspector for the DEC, to Lakeland School Superintendent Kenneth J. Connolly, in which he spells out the dangers of not handling the waste correctly. The letter is dated May 8.

Wendy Rosenbach of the DEC confirmed the letter was sent but said that some tests can take from four to six weeks to complete.

Lefkowitz also worries that not enough testing has been done in the school.

"The building has central air," he said. "Why didn't they take samples from the ventilation system?"

Halbfinger said that she did not know why the process took so long or how long such a process normally takes.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyl, are a class of organic compound that were used in, among other things, construction materials. They were banned in the 1977 due to high toxicity and are classified as organic pollutants, but some caulking used before 1977 still contains PCBs. PCBs are considered probable human carcinogens and are linked to adverse health effects such as low birth weight, thyroid disease, and learning, memory, and immune system disorders, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency Web site.