



# Worcester Public Schools

Worcester, Massachusetts

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Melinda J. Boone, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

January 24, 2011

Dear Parents and Staff:

The Administration of the Worcester Public Schools takes the concerns of parents about the well being of students, as well as the concerns from the staff that work in our buildings, very seriously. The purpose of this letter is to address the steps that the Administration is taking with regards to all environmental issues that exist in our schools. An article in the Worcester Telegram and Gazette on Friday, January 21, 2011, reported that the Education Association of Worcester alleges that four schools have PCBs that exist in window caulking at levels higher than actionable limits.

PCBs are man-made chemicals that persist in the environment and were widely used in construction materials and electrical products prior to 1978. PCBs can affect the immune, reproductive, nervous and endocrine systems and are potentially cancer-causing if they build up in the body over long periods of time. The greatest risks from PCBs involve sustained long-term exposure to high levels of PCBs. Most peoples' exposure to PCBs is through eating, particularly through fish, meat and dairy products that contain PCBs.

Although Congress banned the manufacture and most uses of PCBs in 1976 and they were phased out in 1978, there is evidence that many buildings across the country constructed or renovated from 1950 to 1978 may have PCBs at high levels in the caulk around windows and door frames, between masonry columns and in other masonry building materials. Exposure to these PCBs may occur as a result of their release from the caulk when disturbed into the air, dust, surrounding surfaces and soil, and through direct contact. Just because PCBs exist in caulking material does not mean that exposure and health impacts are likely. If the caulking is intact, no appreciable exposure to PCBs are likely and hence health effects would not be expected.

In January 2010, in conjunction with consultants with expertise in environmental issues, the Worcester Public Schools began a comprehensive Environmental Management System. The purpose of this Environmental Management System is to proactively, effectively and properly identify and manage all environmental issues that may exist

within our school buildings. One of several issues being addressed through the Environmental Management System is window caulking. Currently, there are no federal or state regulations that deal with the handling of PCBs in window caulking. However, as part of the proactive environmental management system, the Worcester Public Schools is following the guidelines issued by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2009 regarding the management of materials potentially containing PCBs. The current work of the district includes designing plans for the containment, management or removal of environmentally dangerous materials in our buildings.

As part of the recent five-year capital improvement plan, the School Committee has approved the replacement of windows at various schools within the district, including Burncoat High and Doherty High. At all of our schools, the district will monitor the caulking condition as part of the environmental management system.


The EPA is currently conducting research to better understand the relationship between PCBs in caulk and PCB concentrations in caulk, air and dust. The EPA is doing research to determine the sources and levels of PCBs in buildings in the U.S. and to evaluate different strategies to reduce exposures. To learn more about PCBs in caulk go to <http://www.epa.gov/pcbsincaulk>. In addition, attached is a brochure prepared by the EPA aimed for school districts regarding PCBs.

Again, we take these and all other issues that might affect our students and staff very seriously. The Administration of the Worcester Public Schools will work with all parties necessary to ensure that all steps are taken to make our school buildings safe and healthy learning settings.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melinda J. Boone". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Melinda J. Boone, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools



# Fact Sheet for Schools: Caulk containing PCBs may be present in older schools and buildings

**B**etween 1950 and 1978, caulk containing potentially harmful PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) was used in many buildings, including schools. Although PCBs were banned in the United States in 1978, contaminated caulk still exists in older establishments that have not had the caulk replaced. PCB bioaccumulation in children can damage immune, reproductive, nervous, and endocrine systems.

Children can be exposed to PCBs by:

- Breathing in dust contaminated with PCBs
- Touching caulk and contaminated soil directly
- Putting their hands into their mouths after touching the caulk, soil, and surrounding building materials.

PCBs were not added to caulk after 1978. Therefore, in general, schools built after 1978 do not contain PCBs in caulk.

## What are PCBs?

PCBs are organic chemicals that were used in construction materials and electrical products produced before 1978. Caulk containing these chemicals may still be present in older schools and buildings, sometimes at high levels. With increased awareness and cleanup efforts, PCB levels in the United States have decreased substantially.

## How are people exposed to PCBs?

People whose workplaces and jobs involve working with PCB-laden objects or in PCB cleanup are at the highest risk for elevated exposure. Most people have some accumulation of PCBs in their bodies. Fish, meat, and dairy contain small amounts of PCBs. In fact, most peoples' exposure to PCBs is via the food chain. When products containing PCBs are disposed of improperly, PCBs can enter waterways and contaminate fish and other animals. Indoor air has been found to contain PCBs from some types of caulk in building materials. People can also be exposed to PCBs when handling PCB-containing products such as caulk.

## Does the caulk in my home or other places contain PCBs?

PCBs in caulk have not been found in single-family homes. EPA has only found the chemical in caulk in large, older apartment complexes and some older buildings, such as schools.

## What can I do about PCBs in schools?

If caulk containing PCBs is discovered, you should avoid direct contact with caulk and nearby porous materials, if possible. If caulk-containing PCBs are discovered, be sure to limit exposure to the caulk until it has been safely removed. Here are some ways for decreasing exposure:

- Keep children from touching caulk or surfaces near caulk
- Clean frequently to reduce dust
- Use wet cloths to clean surfaces
- Use vacuums with HEPA filters
- Wash children's hands with soap and water before eating
- Wash children's toys often
- Wash surfaces, window sills, walls, and objects often in rooms known to have PCB-containing caulk
- Consider testing the air for PCBs or test caulk if it is peeling or visibly deteriorating
- Follow safe work practices when renovating
- Improve ventilation by opening windows or adding exhaust fans

## What NOT to Do:

- Do not attempt to remove PCB-containing caulk by yourself. PCBs should be removed by personnel wearing protective equipment who follow procedures to minimize the spread of PCBs
- Do not sweep with dry brooms or use dusters because they spread dust.

## Are children in direct danger if their school has caulk containing PCBs?

PCBs accumulate in the body in high levels only after prolonged exposure to the chemical. Follow the recommended procedures to reduce exposure. Restricting children from areas where PCB-containing caulk is located, promoting safe work practices during renovation activities in schools, and removing caulk safely as part of a PCB removal or renovation project reduces the potential for exposure.

## EPA is helping to address the issue of PCBs in caulk

EPA is conducting research on how the public is exposed to PCBs in caulk and on the best approaches for reducing exposure and potential risks associated with PCBs in caulk. Where PCBs have been found in caulk, EPA is committed to helping schools and communities enact plans to reduce exposure. Please contact your regional PCB coordinator at 888-835-5372 for help with assessing contamination and exposure and developing cleanup plans.

## Contact

Call EPA's PCBs in Caulk Hotline: 888-835-5372 to learn more about PCBs in caulk and to get information on PCB professionals in your area.

