

PCBs IN NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS

• A Fact Sheet for Parents •

SUMMARY

- Scientific experts say that **PCBs in caulk pose a significant risk to human health, especially children's health.**
- **The presence of PCBs in caulk violates the federal Toxic Substances Control Act**

PCBs: The Basics

- Banned in 1978, polychlorinated biphenyls, known as PCBs, are highly toxic man-made chemicals that can cause damage to the reproductive system, the brain, and the immune system. They are probable human carcinogens, and they are especially harmful to children.

THE DANGER OF PCBs IN CAULK

- PCBs were added to caulk to make it more elastic from the late 1950s until they were banned in 1978.
- Starting about 15 years ago, European researchers recognized caulk in buildings as a source of potentially dangerous PCB exposure. More recently, US scientists have published articles on the issue, and the University of Rhode Island and the University of Massachusetts both carried out major PCB removal projects following the discovery of PCB-containing caulk on their campuses.
- Studies show that **PCB-containing caulk causes indoor PCB air contamination.** Studies also show that **living in a building or attending a school with PCB-containing caulk increases levels of PCBs in human blood.**

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN NYC SCHOOLS & THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- An April 2008 *Daily News* analysis, which DOE has not disputed, found levels of PCBs over 50 parts per million (or "ppm") in caulk at 6 of 9 schools tested.
- Federal regulations provide that **levels of PCBs over 50 ppm, regardless of circumstances, "present an unreasonable risk of injury to health"**. This "unreasonable risk of injury to health" is currently present in 6 of the 9 schools tested by the Daily News.
- More than 250 NYC schools were built between the 1950's and 1978 when PCBs-containing caulk was commonly used. Those schools are likely to contain illegal and potentially dangerous levels of PCBs in caulk.
- Although there is no evidence that any NYC agency was aware that caulk was dangerous when it was used, they are all aware now. **Despite this knowledge, and despite public demands for testing, the DOE has revealed no plans to test the caulk in any schools.** City and state legislation to require testing has been introduced, and federal legislation to fund remediation efforts, sponsored by Congressmen Serrano and Crowley, passed the House on June 4 and is expected to pass the Senate .

(please see reverse)

SAMPLING OF STUDIES: The Health Risks of Low Levels of Exposure to PCBs

- Low levels of PCB in air can cause negative impacts on adults, including attention problems.
- Children exposed to low levels of PCBs just after birth can be more susceptible to illness.
- Prenatal exposure to low levels of PCBs has been linked to significant **sex hormone effects**.
- Science is in the early stages of defining the risks presented by low-level exposure to PCBs (as opposed to acute exposure). But it is increasingly clear that those risks are significant.

NYC DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: Inadequate Response

- The DOE and other city agencies have taken the position that there is no risk because the levels of PCBs are low and there is no exposure pathway.
- However, studies clearly demonstrate that there is an exposure pathway: PCBs enter the air and, through breathing, the body. Oral ingestion is also possible if caulk, or playground dirt contaminated by caulk, is touched.
- And, as seen above, low levels of exposure **do** pose a risk to human health—and anything over 50 ppm is defined as presenting an unreasonable risk to health by the EPA.
- ***The air tests carried out by city agencies were inadequate for several reasons.*** Most important, they were based on a 1977 danger threshold for healthy adults in known PCB-contaminated worksites (1,000 nanograms of PCBs per cubic meter or 1,000 ng/m³). ***The threshold was never intended to be applied to the general population, much less to children.*** The threshold fails to reflect advances in science over the last 30 years that show that lower levels of exposure are associated with negative health outcomes. The current threshold was picked merely because it was the lowest level that could be reliably detected in 1977. We can now test down to 10 ng/m³. Finally, even if the threshold were appropriate, the DOE's tests were not sensitive enough to detect the corresponding "action level", or level that triggers efforts to identify and eliminate the source of risk.

Note: When the Universities of MA and RI discovered PCB-contaminated caulk, they ran air tests for 16 hours, which gave them the ability to detect levels as low as 30-50 ng/m³. The DOE's tests were only 90 minutes long, making their limit of detection over 10x higher.

WHAT NOW?

Children and staff in NYC schools deserve the highest level of protection against known severe toxins. DOE should test the caulk and address this problem in a responsible manner. The financial cost of making schools safe is not an acceptable basis for refusing to confront the problem and replace the caulk. (And that cost would not necessarily be borne by the city: a school district in Westchester County has filed suit against Monsanto, the manufacturer of PCBs, to be reimbursed for its caulk removal.) Please join a growing coalition of parents in demanding testing and removal of PCBs and safe schools for all children.

Please contact NYLPI Staff Attorney Miranda Massie at (212) 244-4664 or mmassie@nylpi.org with questions or comments or for information on joining the coalition.