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Amid PCB Testing, New Schools For Some Hartford Children

VANESSA DE LA TORRE Recent Columns

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HARTFORD — Nearly five months into the academic year, Mille Soto tried explaining to her 4-year-old daughter why she was dropping her off at Wish School Tuesday morning, instead of the usual Clark School.

The prekindergartner was fearful and didn't want to get out of the car, Soto said, and soon, both mother and daughter were crying.

"You're going to go to this school because they have to fix your school," Soto recalled telling her. "They need to make your school a little bit better so you and your friends can play.' I didn't know what other way to explain it to her. And she was like, 'This is not my school.'"

After the threat of poor weather closed city schools Monday, Tuesday was the first day at alternative school sites for Clark students who have been barred from their school since airborne traces of polychlorinated biphenyls — toxic chemicals known as PCBs — were discovered in the Clark Street building in late December.

City school officials last week described the PCB contamination at Clark as "low levels," and they said relocating students and staff to three other city schools, at least temporarily, is out of "an abundance of caution" while they conduct more testing.

But one national expert on PCBs said Tuesday that the decision by Hartford school administrators to evacuate Clark was "the only responsible thing" to do once they determined that the chemicals were tainting the air quality.

"There is no safe level of PCBs," said David O. Carpenter, director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University at Albany. "All they do is cause harm. They increase the risk of a great number of diseases, and the one that's of most significance in a school is that they're known to reduce cognitive function — learning and memory. And that's the last thing you want in a school."

A new round of PCB testing on Jan. 5 at Clark included one sample that recorded 571 nanograms per cubic meter of air, a level that exceeds the Environmental Protection Agency's recommended limit for middle-schoolers.

"That's enormously high," said Carpenter, who has been researching PCBs since the 1980s but has not been involved in the Clark case. "That shows you have a major source of PCBs in the building."

The EPA has identified PCBs as "probable" carcinogens for people and a risk factor for a host of other long-term health effects. The industrial chemicals were used in a range of commercial products from the 1950s to the late 1970s, such as in oil-based paints, sealants for flooring and ceiling tiles, insulating fluid in fluorescent lighting and solvent for window caulk.

Clark, which enrolls nearly 350 students in prekindergarten to eighth grade, was built around 1971.

Carpenter said a concern is long-term exposure at Clark over the past four decades — and more broadly, the risk at many older schools around the country that were constructed with materials containing PCBs before the U.S. banned the production of those chemicals in 1979.

"This is an enormous problem everywhere and we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg," Carpenter said. "It's a real dilemma for school boards,

because once you know they're there, you must do something about it. And the federal government doesn't have funds to pay for it, so it falls to the local community. So it's very complicated."

David Medina, a city schools spokesman, has said there is no record of a PCB test having been conducted at Clark before the recent samples.

Air samples from Clark were taken on Dec. 19 as workers prepared to place a new fire protection system in the school, which would involve installing sprinkler piping through painted walls, according to the school system. School officials said the results on Dec. 24, the beginning of winter break, showed PCB levels higher than the EPA's recommended exposure for children under age 6.

After the building was ventilated, nine more air samples were taken on Jan. 5, according to internal emails released by the district through the Freedom of Information Act. Two of the results were above the EPA's recommended limit for elementary school students.

Clark students in prekindergarten to third grade have been relocated to the nearby Museum Academy at Wish School; students in grades 4 to 8 were sent to the Journalism and Media Academy Magnet School; and two Clark classrooms for students with disabilities were moved to Simpson-Waverly School, administrators said. The school system has not indicated when Clark might reopen.

Soto, a parent leader who co-chairs Clark's School Governance Council, said Tuesday afternoon that Superintendent Beth Schiavino-Narvaez "did the right thing by closing the whole school. ... She was thinking of the safety of the students, the teachers, the parents. She's thinking for everybody's sake."

But after a Saturday meeting for Clark families, "there's still a lot of questions that need to be answered," Soto said. "How long is the school going to be closed? Be honest. ... And how long has that problem been in the school?"

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