
Worcester school board is urged to end resistance to PCB testing at Burncoat, Doherty

Thursday Posted Oct 6, 2016 at 9:44 PM
Updated at 9:05 AM

By **Scott O'Connell**
Telegram & Gazette Staff

[Follow](#)

WORCESTER – Teachers, students and a former city mayor on Thursday night called upon the School Committee to drop its appeal of a recent state ruling allowing the city teachers union to test for hazardous materials in two high schools, calling the School Department's resistance to testing "disgraceful."

The School Committee did not vote to drop the appeal, but agreed to take up the issue in an upcoming executive session to explore options to address the problem.

For six years, the Educational Association of Worcester has been trying to get permission from the district to test the levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, at Burncoat High School and Doherty Memorial High School. The chemicals, banned in the U.S. since 1979, are considered potentially carcinogenic to humans.

Two months ago, after four years of legal battling, the state's labor relations department found in favor of the EAW's request to test the schools, but the district has appealed that decision.

"It's disgraceful," former Worcester mayor Raymond Mariano said of the schools' continued resistance to testing. "You're putting children at risk; you're putting staff at risk. I ask – I demand – that you solve this problem. Drop this appeal, and do it tonight."

Mr. Mariano said he knew of 15 people who worked at Burncoat High, including his wife, a teacher at the school, who have been afflicted with cancer. He accused unnamed school officials of “covering up” evidence that PCBs in the building were responsible.

Roger Nugent, president of the teachers union, said initial testing of the two high schools years ago suggested there were elevated levels of PCBs at both sites. He urged the School Committee to allow the EAW to hire an industrial hygienist to perform additional testing, and to work with the union to review how other towns and cities have dealt with their PCB problems.

Worcester Mayor Joseph M. Petty pointed out the district has already spent more than \$53 million over the last four years to replace windows, remove ballasts and perform other work recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency as best practices in dealing with PCBs. He also denied Mr. Mariano’s assertion that the schools had concealed the problem from the public.

“I don’t think we hid anything. I don’t think we tried to hide anything. We tried to make the best decisions with the information we had at the time,” Mr. Petty said. “We didn’t put our heads in the sand.”

The mayor said his and the schools’ ultimate hope the last few years has been for the state’s school building authority to approve funding to replace Burncoat High and Doherty High, although that hasn’t happened yet.

“If we have to change the strategy to do that, we’ll change the strategy,” he said, adding that he was personally troubled by the revelation of Mr. Mariano’s wife’s cancer diagnosis, as well as the other reported cancer cases at Burncoat High.

In addition to moving for the PCB testing issue to be brought up in the committee’s next executive session meeting, Mr. Petty proposed the district have an information session with the Burncoat High community about the situation sometime in the next several weeks.

A couple of School Committee members who spoke at Thursday’s meeting, John Monfredo and Dianna Biancheria, also expressed a desire to see the problem rectified sooner rather than later. Mr. Monfredo said if money is an impediment, the schools could seek funding help from the federal or state government or even the local community.

Dante Comparetto, who identified himself as a business owner and parent in Worcester, said he'd "rather be financially bankrupt than morally bankrupt," in making his plea to the committee to drop its appeal. Worcester resident Richard Shea, a former teacher who said his wife taught at Burncoat High and his children went to school there, meanwhile expressed frustration that it's taken so long for the School Department to do something about the PCB problem.

"Why do we have to be pushed to the wall to do the right thing?" he asked.

Nicholas Wurst, a 2014 graduate of Doherty, said he was disturbed to be finding out about the problem now.

"I hear all this now, and think back," he said. "The fact the testing is being blocked is really, really upsetting to me."