

Students, staff became ill as this Monroe school let toxic chemicals go unchecked

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Since 2014, students, teachers and parents at the Monroe school Sky Valley Education Center said something didn't seem right. People were getting sick — having cognitive problems, cysts, and cancer diagnoses.

A new report from the Seattle Times and Pro-Publica says that's due to toxic chemicals known as PCBs. And the school has known about them for years.

School officials were warned there was a problem when liquids containing polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), toxic chemicals previously used in preserving building materials, began dripping from light fixtures at Sky Valley Education Center.

But they didn't spring into action.

"There's no requirement to actually remove them from buildings when they are flagged", says Lulu Ramadan, an investigative reporter with the Seattle Times.

"So in this case, they did some testing and that involved air and wipe sample testing throughout the campus. And periodically took some actions like removing light ballasts or carpets."

The level of PCBs required a more aggressive response to keep people safe. Over the course of eight years, the Health Department and Environmental Protection Agency stepped in, forcing the school to remove light fixtures and caulking in the walls.

But time and time again, inspectors returned. Each time they would find things the school had missed.

In some cases, PCB levels had even climbed.

One of the biggest issues, says Ramadan, is that there's no way to force schools to remove PCBs.

"One of the biggest criticisms from the people who experienced this...Sky Valley teachers and parents, as well as the those who have advocated for remediation efforts when it comes to environmental hazards in schools, is that there is no clear line in state law. There's nothing that mandates specific action."

Even today, the EPA is unsure if Sky Valley Education Center is free of PCBs. The organization is still waiting on a corrective action plan from the school district.



But for now, the school remains open, and students are back in class.