Mold in schools causes health, maintenance issues

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — To protest a menace in their school, nearly 1,000 students at East High School in Memphis skipped homeroom one day.

Across the state, another 1,000 students spent a month at Bristol Motor Speedway — not watching NASCAR races, but studying in the skyboxes while a threat was removed at Sullivan East High School.

In each case, the problem was the same: mold.

Nationwide, school districts are finding allergy-inducing mold in walls, on carpets and near ventilation systems. While one report blames aging buildings and mold-promoting construction techniques, one expert says it's due to a lack of proper ventilation in newer schools.

"It's a growing problem, and it's one of the more high-priority issues that schools are dealing with," said Ericka Plater, indoor air quality manager for the American Association of School Administrators.

Mold has forced some administrators to shut down schools and make millions of dollars in repairs. Others face lawsuits from students and staff who claim moldy buildings caused long-term health problems.

In Austin, Texas, voters approved a $493 million bond issue in February to pay for mold removal and preventive maintenance in 91 schools. In Fort Myers, Fla., several teachers sued county school officials last week, accusing them of failing to fix mold problems.

In Tennessee, just as the Bristol students returned to their school, teenagers at Heritage High School about two hours away in Maryville got an unexpected four-week vacation when mold was found there. The repair estimate: $1 million.

Memphis school board members called an emergency meeting after hundreds of students there refused to enter East High, which some parents described as a "mold-infested hazard."

About 600 students received medical screenings after Donald Criss Mister Jr., 17, died Nov. 16 following an asthma attack. So far, no link has been found between the death and mold in the school, but the school board hired an environmental consultant, and federal inspectors with the Environmental Protection Agency will tour it Monday.

Sonji Wright, the mother of a student, told Superintendent Johnnie B. Watson that bringing in experts wasn't enough.

"My baby is on a respirator," Mr. Watson," she screamed through a white mask that covered her nose and mouth in a sign of protest. "She can't breathe, and what are you going to do about it?"

Mold problems usually go unnoticed until people become ill. No federal agency regulates or monitors air quality in schools, and few states inspect for it.

In Tennessee, no state agency monitors mold in schools.

"It's really everybody's problem because it's such a new issue," said Judith Morgan, the state Education Department spokeswoman. "That's why it seems to be falling kind of between the cracks."

Tennessee's education department sent e-mail to school officials statewide Friday and directed them to an EPA Web site that offers guidance on air quality issues.

Plater said a federal report suggests old, dilapidated schools might be more susceptible to mold. Others say the Gypsum wallboard and carpeted floors that replaced plaster and wood make newer schools a greater target because they soak up more moisture.

David Weekley, president of Knoxville-based Environmental Consulting and Testing, said the 1970s energy crisis prompted construction of more airtight schools. Less natural ventilation is part of the problem, he said.

Another factor is the tendency of cash-strapped districts to delay maintenance and patch leaks, he said.

Mold occurs naturally and can grow almost anywhere.

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In developing nations, a tree becomes a treasure, providing homes and livelihoods. In developed nations, a tree becomes a trash can.

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that’s warm and damp. Experts have identified more than 100,000 species of mold; at least 1,000 are common in the United States.

While the most common molds generally aren’t hazardous, some types are blamed for headaches, fatigue and respiratory problems.

Sullivan County Schools director John O’Dell said the Bristol high school was shut down for about six weeks and $600,000 worth of repairs after children became ill and several classrooms tested positive for black mold, or Stachybotrys chartarum, which can cause breathing problems.

The mold there was primarily around poorly insulated pipes that carry cold water throughout the building to cool classrooms. The pipes created condensation that dripped onto porous ceiling tiles, providing a breeding ground for mold.

“I think we’re all more sensitive to it now,” O’Dell said. “We’ve told the principals and custodians to keep an eye out for any discolored tile and then replace it immediately.”

On The Net:
- Environmental Protection Agency:
  http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/scfaqs.html
- Tennessee Education Department:
  http://www.state.tn.us/education/