

Schools do homework on mould

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By Kellie Hudson

Potentially dangerous scourge isn't confined

to portables

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Chair, Peel public school board

YORK REGION BUREAU

More than school bells are ringing across the province.

Health officials have set off deafening alarm bells too, alerting school boards to the fact that potentially dangerous mould doesn't just grow in old rundown portables. It's in schools, too.

Earlier this month, two elementary schools in Greater Toronto were shut down within days of each other. In York Region, four more are being inspected for *stachybotrys chartarum*, a type of mould that has been linked to upper respiratory tract infections and other health ailments.

Mouldy portables aren't new. For more than a year, school boards across Ontario have been spending hundreds of thousands of dollars inspecting, ripping down and refurbishing some of the province's 14,000 portables - temporary structures commonly set up at schools filled to capacity.

But shutting down an entire school? This has many parents, school administrators and some politicians extremely nervous. It raises some serious questions:

Is someone over-reacting, or is that even possible when it comes to the safety of our children?

How bad is the problem?

Should all schools, not just portables, be more closely inspected?

If a massive, province-wide clean up is necessary, who should pay?

Closing an entire building because of mould is 'exceptional, a very uncommon thing,' says David Miller, a Carleton University chemistry professor and one of North America's leading mould experts.

'In my experience, the number of times I've actually seen the need to shut down a building, in other words, get everyone out of it because of mould, is a handful in my whole career,' he said in an interview

from Ottawa.

The jury is still out on the potentially harmful health effects of mould. It is absorbed through the respiratory tract, making the most common symptoms felt by people who experience some sort of allergy.

Since the issue of mouldy portables started making headlines in early 1998, there have been countless stories of sick children and teachers complaining of headaches, runny noses, coughs, upper respiratory tract infections and fatigue.

That's enough evidence to make health officials take notice.

``The burden of illness from mould is clearly is unknown, and that's why there's a debate on it,'' said Dr. Bob Nosal, medical officer of health for Halton Region, one of the first areas in Ontario where mould was discovered in school portables. ``But because it's unknown, if you find it, the prudent course of action is to deal with it.'

Several studies on air quality in school buildings, not just portables, are under way in North America, Miller said.

In the United States, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health has hired an expert to study dampness in American schools.

In Canada, New Brunswick established a mould and indoor air quality task force with its teachers' union, and Newfoundland tested all its schools last year, Miller said. British Columbia and Quebec have also been proactive on the issue, he said.

In Ontario, Pollution Probe is involved in an initiative called Healthy Schools, Healthy Children. The aim is to develop a provincial strategy to ensure safe school environments for our children, said Ian Morton, director of environmental health.

Unfortunately, despite several requests, the provincial government has refused to come to the table.

Experts like Miller stress that the key to healthy indoor air, free of mould and other contaminants, is proper construction, ventilation and vigilant maintenance inspections.

If a school board is in the practice of something he calls ``deferred maintenance,'' then of course there will be problems.

``It's not a big surprise that, if you don't look after a building in Canada, it will eventually leak,'' Miller said.

Gary Gibson, Durham district school board's occupational health and safety officer, credits an early recognition that mould is a ``possible agent for poor indoor air quality.'

He first started testing for it back in 1991.

``Maintenance is the key,'' Gibson said. ``Maintenance, maintenance, maintenance.''

Jane Allison of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, which has an asbestos problem but found only 12 of 200 portables had mould, also emphasizes maintenance, but acknowledges Halton and Peel raised awareness.

``It's unfortunate, but one other board's misfortune was a real good

signal for us and allowed us to be proactive,' she said.

But Janet McDougald, chair of the Peel public board, doesn't buy the maintenance argument.

``How can one assume that Peel is the only place that has significant problems with mould? That just doesn't stand to reason,' she said angrily, adding that her board's maintenance program has been comprehensive.

But some of the big city boards, like the Toronto Catholic board, which has 758 portables, and Durham's public board, with 573 portables, claim to have escaped relatively unscathed.

Part of the problem is there isn't a provincial policy on mould, McDougald said. Instead, local health departments set the parameters.

For example, right now in York Region, there appears to be a policy of zero tolerance, hence the closing of Our Lady of Grace in Aurora.

Although Elizabeth Crowe, chair of the York Region Catholic board accepts that policy, she is frustrated by it.

She's heard as many as 100 school buildings across Ontario - structures called Eldales in the business, which contain a high percentage of drywall - were built in the same way as the school she had to shut down. They could all have the same mould problem, but other boards may not realize it, she said.

Both Crowe and McDougald agree there has to be consistency, and it has to come from the top, so that everyone is forced to follow the same inspection, maintenance and clean-up procedures.

``We've been asking for a province-wide protocol, all around the inspection process, the remediation process,' McDougald said. ``We don't know if we're doing it right. We may be spending more money or less money than we should.''

While many school boards can't agree on how bad the mould situation is, or whether they've cleaned it up or not, most do agree on one thing - whatever the costs, they shouldn't have to pay for it.

McDougald and others have appealed to the provincial government for financial help. To date, the separate and public boards in Peel Region have spent close to \$20 million repairing some of the 1,600 portables that accommodate 40,000 students in the two systems.

Under Bill 160, the Conservative government's controversial education reform act, Queen's Park, not school boards, is in charge of setting education property tax rates. Raising taxes would have been one way for individual school boards to pay for the mould clean up.

In the spring budget, on hold now because of the election campaign, the Conservatives set aside \$50 million to help school boards deal with air quality issues such as mould. But the Peel boards may need that amount alone, McDougald said.

The money is there, and there are different ways to access it under the provincial Pupil Accommodation Grant, argues Drew Nameth, director of business services for the ministry of education. The annual grant provides \$2 billion for heating, lighting, cleaning, repairs, renovations, new construction and paying debt.

For many parents and teachers across Ontario, though, it's not important who pays for what. They just want some assurances that the schools

and portables in which their children spend roughly six hours a day, five days a week, 10 months of the year, are environmentally safe.

Margaret Broad had two children at Our Lady of Grace before it was shut down. What does she want before her children return? If the school is gutted and refurbished, she wants proof from the health department that it has a clean bill of health.

But she doesn't know if even that will be enough. ``I can't help but wonder if the whole thing should be yanked down, and start anew and build it right,'' Broad said.

CAPTIONS:

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EMPTY:

Our Lady of Grace school in Aurora is closed because of mould, forcing out Katie Richardson, left, and Kaitlyn Poisson.

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