

Province urged to take action on mould

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By Kellie Hudson, and Andrew Chung
Parents angry as hazard keeps two schools shut

School

School board demands

funds for mould cleanup

STAFF REPORTERS

Queen's Park must come up with a province-wide policy on mould and the money to help Ontario schools get rid of the potential health hazard, says the chair of the York Region Catholic District School Board.

Two schools in the Greater Toronto Area were closed indefinitely over the weekend due to the discovery of mould.

In Aurora, the Catholic board must move 540 elementary students after mould was found in more than a dozen places in Our Lady of Grace Catholic School.

St. Peter Catholic School in Orangeville was shut down for the same reason, displacing 553 children to nearby facilities.

``I'd like the Ministry of Health to come in and make a definitive statement on where they stand on the mould issue,'' said Elizabeth Crowe, chair of the York Catholic board.

``Someone has to decide what the province-wide policy on mould is going to be, and then whatever they decide, they need to back it up with money.''

Mould is nothing new to school boards across the province, as many have been dealing with the costly clean-up of contaminated portables for the past year.

The key difference in these two most recent cases is that the mould has been found in the school buildings themselves.

But some parents from Our Lady of Grace expressed shock last night that their school building is essentially a temporary structure that is built like a portable but looks like a permanent building.

``We were misled. You see a school, you think it's built properly and it's properly inspected, but obviously not,'' said Karen DaCosta, whose two children attend the school.

Some of the 450 parents at last night's meeting in an Aurora gymnasium shouted ``Tear it down,'' after school officials announced students would be shipped to the King campus of Seneca College for the rest of the year. The school will be refurbished, the officials said.

``I do not have faith this will be followed through with the proper testing required to our comfort level,'' Carol Smith told the meeting held at Light of Christ Catholic School in Aurora. Smith's daughter Leah, in Grade 3, has complained of headaches all year and missed three days of school last week.

Parents were also shocked to learn last night the ventilation system at Our Lady of Grace, installed five years ago because of air quality concerns, hasn't been working properly.

Some vents that feed fresh air into the system have been jammed shut by children playing ball against the outside school wall, they were told.

School officials stressed the vents likely had little impact on the growth of mould, but inspectors said poor ventilation can contribute to unhealthy classrooms.

Some medical officials, environmental engineers and building scientists have linked prolonged exposure to the mould *stachybotrys atra* - the kind found in Our Lady of Grace - to migraines, nosebleeds, asthma, fatigue, rashes, diarrhea and irritability.

The shutdown of entire schools - as opposed to just portables - makes the situation much more serious, both in detection and removal costs, the president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association said earlier yesterday. ``When it was the portables, they were individual units that were easily handled in terms of inspection,'' Marshall Jarvis said.

``Now that we have a regular school building itself, I think what is required is the ministries of labour and health have to call for provincial inspection of all schools of similar design across the province.''

He said the province must intervene with more money.

The York Catholic board and the public and separate school boards in Peel Region have been asked to submit ``interim plans'' on cleaning up the mould problem, so that money can be provided immediately, said education ministry spokesperson Rob Savage.

``We want to get funding to them quickly,'' he said last night, referring to some of the \$50 million that was set aside in the most recent budget to deal with mould cleanup across the province.

Our Lady and four other schools like it are essentially portables with a brick facade that look like permanent buildings.

Yesterday, teachers at an eerily quiet Our Lady spent the day getting ready to move.

Grade 5 student Kaitlyn Poisson, who was enjoying the day off with her friend Katie Richardson, said she would miss the school, but not the headaches it gave her.

Ted Volenezc feels closing the school just weeks away from summer vacation is a major inconvenience and worries about the effect on his 6-year-old daughter Kira, who is in Grade 1.

``I don't think it's a huge concern,'' the 39-year-old man said of the mould.

``It's disruptive to close the school. I don't know how the kids are going to handle it. Relocation for them isn't an easy thing.''

With files from Stan Josey

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WHAT'S GOING ON?:

Ernie Springolo addresses an Aurora parents' meeting on mould issue.

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NOT WORRIED:

Ted Volenecz feels closing Our Lady of Grace just before the holidays is disruptive. ``I don't think it's a huge concern,' he

says of the mould.

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