

Aging portables blamed for student's illness

Aging portables blamed for student's illness:

By Janice Turner

LIFE WRITER

Maureen and Dom Bot don't have any doubt that the mould found in their daughter's portable classroom caused her to be ill throughout the fall.

They pulled Lauren, 11, from the structure outside All Saints Separate School in Mississauga for several days in October when they determined the situation was intolerable.

The building has since been cleared of mould. Just what type of mould, however, will probably never be known, says Maureen Bot. The Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board told Bot in a December letter that no testing had been done on fungus found in the structure.

Three weeks ago, the Catholic board said it will reduce by half its 715 portables over the next five years.

``Every little chink in the armour is worth it,'' says Bot. ``Children should not be exposed to mould, period.''

The same week, its public school counterpart, the Peel District School Board said it will look at buying homes beside overcrowded schools to use as classrooms as part of its plan to eliminate two-thirds of its 782 portables over a similar time frame.

It costs about \$30,000 to renovate a portable after mould is removed and about \$50,000 to replace portables that can't be salvaged.

Some health, building and environmental officials associate prolonged airborne exposure to stachybotrys atra - a mould commonly found in aging and poorly kept school portables - to health problems, including mood changes and poor concentration.

Meanwhile, Lauren, who has had food and environmental allergies since infancy, including a reaction to mould, is at long last regaining her health, now that her school portable has been decontaminated.

``Since she's been out of the mouldy portable, I don't think she's been sick once,'' says Maureen Bot, a pharmacist by training.

Shortly after the fall semester began, the Grade 6 student began to complain of a stuffy nose, nausea, irritability and difficulty sleeping. She experienced vomiting over a period of 10 days. A rash appeared on her body.

``She complained of feeling hot and cold when she was in the portable and she was just very, very tired,'' says Bot. ``It got to the point where she would cry when she got home from school. She said she couldn't concentrate.''

The last time Lauren had been in a portable was in Grade 3. She ended up on a steroid inhaler due to a persistent cough.

When Bot phoned school officials in late September to arrange a meeting to discuss Lauren's health, she was told that all sorts of germs are passed among children, and that a child not wanting to attend school was a social issue.

``I explained that I had checked all other possibilities - both with respect to her health and any other issues she may have had,'' Bot says. ``Because her symptoms eased on weekends when she wasn't at school I could only conclude that it was the abundance of mould in the portable and her allergy to it that was making her so sick.

``I also explained that she had attended school inside the main building for the last two years and had no significant problems.''

Bot says she was distressed by how quickly her daughter's health deteriorated. She was also concerned about her youngster's classmates and wondered what the classroom's environment might mean for them over the longer term.

About 13 per cent of Canadian children, aged 5 to 19, suffer from asthma, a chronic respiratory ailment, and the Canadian Institute of Child Health says indoor and outdoor air quality have a considerable influence on the condition's early development. Minimizing asthma triggers - including tobacco smoke, dust mites and moulds - reduces the number and severity of attacks, it says.

Asthma is an inflammation or swelling of the airways which causes wheezing, breathlessness and chest tightness. Severe attacks can be fatal.

``I was told that I needed to see the whole (school maintenance) budget picture,'' recalls Bot. ``But when you have a sick child that's the only picture you need to see.''

CAPTIONS:

CLEANING UP:

A worker dismantles a mouldy portable classroom at All Saints Separate School in this photo supplied by Maureen Bot.

PETER POWER/TORONTO STAR

PORTABLE DANGER:

Eleven-year-old Lauren Bot, right, was pulled from school by her mother Maureen for several days last October after mould in her portable classroom made her sick.

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Janice Turner, *Aging portables blamed for student's illness.*, The Toronto Star, 01-29-1999.

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