

## Parental concerns: Some say school district not open about mold at Porter Elementary

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The Birdville school district has spent more than \$20,000 in the past month to detect and root out mold in elementary schools, moving swiftly to meet parents' demands.

District officials have sent out letters explaining what they were doing and assuring parents that their children are safe.

It's a start, many parents say - but whether it's enough to win over those who say the district is not addressing the problem openly remains to be seen.

Dozens of parents in northeast Tarrant County's largest school district have said in recent meetings and in interviews that Birdville is not dealing openly with them - and that the W.A. Porter Elementary case illustrates their point.

They question why school officials didn't tell them about a potentially deadly mold found at Porter until after televised news reports about the discovery. Some parents say they've been complaining about the problem since 1994.

A state inspector found the *stachybotrys* mold in March. State officials have said the mold can exacerbate allergies but is not an immediate health hazard to Porter staff and students if it's left undisturbed.

"I don't believe the Birdville district anymore," said Judy Leeper, who says her daughter's allergy problems were agitated because of mold. "They told me three years ago, when we first brought up the issue of the mold in Porter, that I was the only parent complaining. And now I know I was not.

"Back then, they told us they'd recently done air quality testing and that everything was just hunky-dory. So we figured it was only our daughter because that's what he had told us in the letter, and we felt we couldn't ask them to do an expensive cleaning of the whole school for that."

School officials now say they erred in not telling parents right away about the mold, but they said they did so in good faith. They didn't want to create parental panic when health officials assured them there was no immediate health risk, they said.

"In retrospect, it would have been easier and better to communicate right off the bat," said Robin McClure, spokeswoman for the 20,500-student district. "We're trying to correct the perception. We're trying to tell people that maybe we didn't communicate as well as we should, but we're doing that now. We don't want people to think we are hiding anything."

That's exactly what Ms. Leeper and many other parents have thought. A parent and district employee who has accused the district of not being upfront about another matter says parents have good reason to feel that way.

Christi Francis, made inquiries about asbestos at several Birdville schools last year, prompting the state to inspect and issue a report citing several shortfalls in the district's asbestos management plan.

The state found no immediate health hazards, but its report also said the district wasn't open enough with building occupants and parents about the locations of asbestos. The district was also faulted for not providing sufficient public access to its asbestos management plan.

Ms. Francis said the Porter case is the latest example of what she called Birdville officials' keeping things under wraps when they shouldn't.

"The bad part is parents aren't being told the truth," said Ms. Francis. "Things have got to change in this district because this way is not working. People have to be informed. The only reason they jumped as far as they did was because it was on television."

Superintendent Bob Griggs could not be reached for comment Friday. In meetings called by the district to discuss the Porter mold problem with parents, he has told parents that he didn't know about the stachybotrys until he saw the televised report.

The district's air quality reports show complaints about mold at Porter since 1994. Ms. McClure said that she knows of no health-related problems caused by the mold and that parents such as Ms. Leeper should go to their family doctor to make sure their child's problems aren't caused by other factors.

District officials had said they were discussing a parents' request to bring in a pediatric specialist to examine students at Porter, but no decision has been made.

Porter and some other schools in the district have had mold problems after hail damage in recent years allowed water to leak in. District officials have planned to completely re-cover the roof and fix all the leaks since the 1993 bond package was passed. Porter, which had been scheduled for that work this summer, is one of the last schools to undergo repairs.

State officials did not return repeated calls this week. Ken McBride, a regional industrial hygienist for the state Department of Health, has said the mold found at Porter is common in buildings that have leaky roofs and problems with standing water.

Mr. McBride has praised the district for its efforts to fix the mold problem, saying few districts go to the extent Birdville has to repair roofs.

Ms. McClure said it's unfortunate that the district couldn't get to Porter sooner than this summer.

"I think the problem is when you are a parent, you want your child's school fixed now. I understand that," she said. "Parents need to understand - if we had been told there was a health hazard, we would have fixed it immediately. . . . I don't think the district is trying to hide anything."

Part of the problem, she said, is that "We don't know exactly what we have to do."

That's what worries parents. Although Mr. McBride said there is no immediate health risk at Porter because the stachybotrys isn't in the air, he said there's little research on the long-term effects of the mold.

That could change in a second if the mold is disturbed, said Keller Thormahlen, a toxicologist for the state.

"In order for it to be a health concern, there has to be some way where you can see that hazard becoming available into the breathing zone. If there is no pathway from the hazard to the individuals, then you are in pretty good shape. . . . Now, if somebody goes in there and knocks the mold off the ceiling and it gets all over, all bets are off," said Mr. Thormahlen. "The whole exposure to stachybotrys is very complex - there is no cut-and-dried here."

Removal of all stachybotrys and other molds at Porter is scheduled for this summer, when staff and students aren't in the building. Since the district began inspecting nine other schools in response to parent inquiries, district consultants have found small amounts of stachybotrys in Smithfield Middle School. The district cut out the wallboard that contained the stachybotrys and found no evidence of the mold in the air.

Officials also removed carpeting in two rooms at Richland Elementary over last weekend because of another mold found in it.

District officials said the reports on those and other schools are available for public inspection at the district office.  
PHOTO(S): 1. Christi Francis, parent. 2. Robin McClure, district spokeswoman.

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