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SCHOOL SHUTS WING FOR FUNGI STUDY

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By RENEE KOURY, Mercury News Staff Writer

Newark school officials shut down a wing Monday at Lincoln Elementary School, where fungi apparently have made students and teachers sick.

About 180 children from kindergarten to third grade moved into makeshift classrooms in a safe section of the school so experts could begin studying how to get rid of the mold.

Children could be attending class in the temporary rooms for months, Principal Dian Joseph said.

"Some of the children said, 'We're all squished in together,' which we really are," Joseph said. "Some are in storage rooms; some classes are doubling up. Some are in rooms that should have only half the students they have.

"But the amazing part is not one parent has complained. The kids think it's a kind of adventure."

Teachers and children in the school's northwest wing, which also houses the school library, have complained for years of sore throats, watery eyes, coughs and other respiratory problems.

Five of six teachers in that wing have come down with illnesses, and parents say the children stay home sick more often than students who attend class on other parts of the campus.

An air quality expert hired in August found two types of fungus -- stachybotrys and aspergillus -- in the wing. Two weeks ago, at the urging of about two dozen parents, the school board voted to hire American Consulting Engineers of Santa Clara for \$8,620 to find out how to remove and ward off the fungus. Later, the district will hire contractors to carry out the recommendations.

School officials decided to shut down the wing in the meantime. Teachers may go in and out of their old classrooms, but children are barred completely.

"Kids are getting sick with respiratory problems, some more often than

others," personnel director Jerry Trout said. "Because of parent concerns, we decided to take them out."

Though no one has done a survey, the principal said it seems there are more complaints of illness this year than last.

Under a plan crafted by Joseph, the 180 primary students, who formerly used seven classrooms, were condensed Monday into five.

Some classes moved into storage rooms about half the size of a regular classroom. Other classes meet in teachers' lounges or in rooms formerly occupied by "roving" specialty teachers.

The special education class was dismantled and its 11 students assigned to regular classes. In addition, the kindergartners, who usually meet only in the morning, now are divided into morning and afternoon sessions.

Because the library was closed, the librarian must travel from classroom to classroom bearing books. And teachers, who now have little room to store class materials, must carry their supplies around or run back to the old classroom to get them.

"It was a little hectic today," Joseph said. "This is not ideal. . . . If it drags on for months and months, nerves are going to get frayed. But all in all, it's working out. We're doing very well with the resources we have."

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