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SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

HUNTING AN INVISIBLE HAZARD IS THERE SOMETHING IN THE AIR AT SCHOOL? PORTABLES MAY HAVE PROBLEMS; DATA LACKING

DATE: Saturday, June 5, 1999

Section: SECTION: Local

Edition: Morning Final

Page: 1B

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Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTO: PENNY DE LOS SANTOS -- MERCURY NEWS

Students return to their portable classrooms after recess at the Hellyer School in San Jose. Portables may be more prone to ventilation problems and water leaks that contribute to dirty air in all types of school buildings in the state.

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Despite alarms raised by an environmental group, there are no scientific data to show that the air in portable classrooms is less healthy than in conventional ones, according to experts in indoor air quality.

But there are indications that portables may be more prone to ventilation problems and water leaks that contribute to dirty air in all types of school buildings across California, according to a draft report released Friday by a statewide task force.

"These units have endemic indoor environmental quality problems," said the report by the California Interagency Working Group on Indoor Air Quality, which includes experts from state and federal agencies, research laboratories and groups such as the American Lung Association.

The task force noted that some portables have no way to draw in fresh air. Others get air only when the heater or air conditioner is on. Even good ventilation systems get turned off because they're too noisy.

Portables may also be more vulnerable to water damage from leaky roofs and condensation, the task force said, although there have been no surveys to pin down whether this impression is correct.

Nonetheless, air pollution experts say it would be a mistake to focus attention on portables alone.

The task force is recommending a statewide investigation into environmental conditions inside all types of classrooms. And it is asking the state to set up a central authority to monitor school design and maintenance and to train school staff in ways to keep their premises healthy.

"There's nothing to support that portables are intrinsically bad," said Jed Waldman, chief of the state health department's indoor air quality section and leader of the task force.

"But there is something to say that when classrooms are not designed, built and maintained properly, they become environmentally unsound. That's true of your office. It's true of your home. But it's especially true of classrooms, because you have a lot of people in a small place" -- about five times the density of a typical office.

Problems in classrooms

Classrooms of all types suffer from poor ventilation, a lack of maintenance and other conditions that dirty the air, researchers say.

Even attempts to make classes quieter and more comfortable can backfire: Carpets collect dust that can trigger allergies or asthma. Air conditioning systems can harbor mold or bacteria.

Since no one routinely samples the air in California schools, no one knows how many classrooms suffer from polluted air, which can cause irritated eyes and throats, an inability to concentrate, headache, allergic reactions, difficulty breathing and -- in rare cases -- severe, even permanent injury.

"You don't know if you're talking about 10 or 20 percent or 1 or 2 percent" of students who are breathing bad air, said Joan Daisey, head of the indoor environment department at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, who has reviewed hundreds of scientific reports and complaints about classroom air quality.

Based on that review, Daisey estimates that 20 percent to 30 percent of schoolrooms lack ventilation -- the factor most often associated with complaints of health problems due to indoor air pollution.

In a report released May 27, the Environmental Working Group charged that two million California children who go to school in portables may be exposed to unhealthy levels of toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde, benzene and toluene. These gases, known as volatile organic compounds, waft out of particle board, new carpeting, fresh paints, furniture and other materials.

The group estimated that some children may be exposed to levels of formaldehyde that, if they continued through 13 years of schooling, would cause two to three times the number of cancers allowed by government

standards. That translates to two to three cancers per million people over a lifetime.

While the state report released Friday did not address the issue of cancer risks from toxic chemicals, air quality experts say the environmental group's report overstates the danger.

The people who manufacture portables say they're being unfairly singled out. "The buildings we build now are built to the same standards as permanent schools," including those governing ventilation, said Michael Rhodes, president of Modtech Inc. in Perris, which makes about a third of the portables sold to California school districts.

The Environmental Working Group is calling for a survey of air quality in portable classrooms, limits on the levels of indoor pollutants that students breathe and policies that require builders to use less toxic materials in portables.

It is also backing a bill by Assemblyman Kevin Shelley, D-San Francisco, that would direct the state to review the design of schools to see if they can be made healthier. The bill would also require teaching school staff how to improve indoor air quality and mandate regular audits of potential problems such as poor ventilation or mold.

Portables are under increased scrutiny because their numbers are mushrooming in California due to swelling enrollments and state-mandated smaller class sizes for children in kindergarten through third grade. The Environmental Working Group estimates that there are now more than 86,000 in use.

In an incident three years ago, a parent became ill after spending time in a portable classroom at Christa McAuliffe Elementary School in Cupertino.

The school district had the portable and other school buildings tested, said Chuck Corr, director of facilities modernization for the Cupertino Union School District. "We had the EPA working with us and we were never able to find a single thing that was a problem."

The Cupertino experience is apparently not unusual, according to Daisey's review of 147 complaints nationwide.

In many cases, she found, investigators reported either undetectable levels of volatile organic compounds in problem classrooms or concentrations no higher than those in a typical home. Where high concentrations were found, they were traced to specific sources such as photocopiers.

Limited investigation

She noted, however, that the health effects of exposure to many indoor air pollutants, including the volatile organic compounds, "have been investigated to only a very limited extent."

Daisey said that while she doesn't think parents should be unduly worried about the air schoolchildren breathe, "I think it's time for the state to get more concerned."

She added, "I don't think you should run out and start passing a lot of legislation until you find out what the extent of the problem is."

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