



HEALTHY WATER HEALTHY MINDS



The Situation

Across the United States, children are being exposed to dangerously high levels of lead at school. Sadly, children who attend schools in the St. Louis area are also experiencing this injustice. While no level of lead exposure is safe, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that lead in school water fountains should not exceed concentrations of 1 part per billion (“ppb”). According to the St. Louis Public School District’s website, in August of 2016, the District had its water sampled and the tested results revealed that multiple schools in the District tested over the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommended level.

Recently obtained public records provided by the District show a similar trend. According to public records produced by the St. Louis Public School District, tests performed between 06/04/2020 to 06/16/2020 indicated that lead was present in water sampled from drinking fountains at several District schools over the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommended level. In fact, the records provided by the St. Louis Public School District revealed lead levels between 1.1 and 4.4 ppb in water sampled from some of the drinking fountains and sinks at certain District schools.

Lead is an extremely toxic substance that affects multiple organ systems of the body. Children younger than six and pregnant women are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, lead exposure can cause damage to the brain and nervous system, irritability, abdominal pain, seizures, and other adverse health effects. In addition, the National Institutes of Health found that lead exposure can cause behavioral and emotional problems, such as anxiety, depression, or aggression disorders. Some of these health effects are irreversible. Because of these serious side effects, the Environmental Protection Agency has set the maximum contaminant level goal for lead in drinking water at 0 ppb.

What are the potential health impacts?

How did we get here?

The United States Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act (“SDWA”) in 1974 to regulate various contaminants that may be found in drinking water. Under the SDWA, a public water system is in violation if ten percent of its water samples test higher than 15 ppb. However, if a building such as a home or school hooks up to a public water source, they are not directly regulated under the SDWA. Generally, St. Louis area schools are not directly regulated under the SDWA because these schools receive their water from a public water source. Furthermore, Missouri statutes do not require schools to test their water directly for lead. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 90,000 schools are not required to test their water directly. This is concerning because once the water enters a school building, it may be exposed to outdated lead service lines, drinking fountains and other plumbing fixtures that may contain lead.

I have received funding to spend the next two years addressing lead contamination in St. Louis area schools. This work will not cost affected communities any money. My work focuses on representing affected community members interested in learning more about the water their children drink at school and empowering those community members to work to reduce lead levels in St. Louis area schools. In addition, my funding allows me to work on a state legislative campaign that will advocate for mandatory testing in all Missouri schools.

Where do we go from here?

Please Reach Out

If you would like to learn more about this issue, please reach out to me via email or phone. I am currently a staff attorney at Great Rivers Environmental Law Center. Great Rivers has served the state of Missouri and beyond, providing free and reduced-fee legal services to individuals, organizations, and citizen groups who are working to protect the environment and public health.

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