

Health Department

Environmental Health Services

May 6, 2014

Dear Ms. Purvine,

Thank you for your inquiry regarding potential environmental health hazards at Corbett Middle School. One of my roles as a public health physician for Multnomah County Health Department is to assure that everyone, especially children, have safe places to live, work, play and learn.

Below are the concerns you listed in your May 2nd email to David Thomson, Multnomah County Health Department Environmental Health, with our responses immediately following.

Building code

The issue: The photo essay of Corbett School District (<http://corbett.k12.or.us/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/A-Photo-Essay-of-Corbett-School-District-Facilities.pdf>) describes structural and design issues that do not meet current building code for earthquake and fire safety.

Public health response: The school was apparently built in 1923, and while it presumably met all code requirements at the time it was built, it likely does not meet modern seismic and fire code requirements. Except for critical fire safety requirements (see http://ecodes.biz/ecodes_support/free_resources/Oregon/10_Fire/10_PDFs/), there is no requirement for buildings constructed according to the building codes in effect at the time of construction to be upgraded to current codes. That said, the safest approach would be to make the necessary upgrades as soon as feasible.

Water

The issue: You have been told that the water in school drinking fountains is "non-potable." The flyer you attached to your email states that "tap water runs brown."

Public health response: You were correct in also directing this question to the Corbett Water District, as they are primarily responsible for ensuring and monitoring the quality of the water as it enters the school's plumbing. The school may have galvanized steel pipes that are corroded inside, releasing rust and turning the water a brown color. Rusty water is generally not a health concern.

If lead is a concern, helpful guidance specific to testing water in schools for lead is available at the Environmental Protection Agency's web site at <http://water.epa.gov/drink/info/lead/testing.cfm>. Even if elevated lead levels are found in the school's water, all that may be required to ensure safe drinking water is flushing of the system for a few seconds or minutes each morning.

Lead paint

The issue: The photo essay includes photos of peeling paint that likely contains lead given when the school was built. It is not clear if there is peeling lead paint in areas children frequent.

Public health response: Lead exposure in children is most common – and most dangerous – in children under age six because of its toxic effects on the brain and nerves. There is no formal medical recommendation to screen older children because overall the risk of lead poisoning is very low. Public health rarely sees elevated blood levels in children older than age six. Elevated blood lead levels in school age children are usually attributed to remodeling of houses built before 1960 without adequate precautions or hobbies like casting ammunition or

fishing weights that inadvertently expose kids to lead. There is no conclusive evidence to link elevated blood lead levels with cancer.

Chipped or peeling lead paint in areas children frequent should be removed using lead-safe work practices; see <http://www2.epa.gov/lead> for more information.

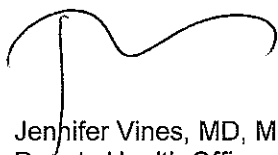
Asbestos

The issue: The photo essay includes a statement about asbestos in pipes, insulation, floor and ceiling tiles. The flier attached to your email suggests that kids are "breathing carcinogens."

Public health response: Breathing asbestos fibers can cause cancer, but if the asbestos is safely contained in pipes, pipe insulation and tiles, very few fibers are released into the air. The Environmental Protection Agency has specific requirements for protecting school children and staff from asbestos exposure; see www2.epa.gov/asbestos/school-buildings.

Thank you again for raising these important questions. If there is other information we can provide please let us know.

Sincerely, ~

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer Vines", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jennifer Vines, MD, MPH
Deputy Health Officer
Multnomah County Health Department

Cc: Randy Trani, Superintendent, Corbett School District