

Asbestos predicament

School officials in the dark

By LEE SEGLEM
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The way Richard Salimena tells it, learning about asbestos in school is like trying to catch a roll of red tape that is unraveling at high speed.

Salimena, superintendent of Waterford Township schools, was told by the state in 1976 to check for traces of the cancer-causing substance in school ceilings. Some was found in the paint on three classrooms at Alco Elementary School.

A Cherry Hill consulting firm tested air samples, and Salimena "breathed a sigh of relief" when the results fell well within safe government standards.

Last year, however, Salimena found out that the those "standards" apply only to adult males.

And on Thursday, he learned that the federal government has determined the air sample test for schools is inadequate and probably inaccurate.

"THERE JUST seems to be a state of confusion and a lack of leadership," said Salimena. "We should have been the first to know. I want to get this in writing, and I hope they (the government) make recommendations on what they want us to do and who will pay for it."

His frustration was echoed by other school administrators grappling with this potential health hazard.

Minor amounts of asbestos have been detected in 29 schools in Camden, Burlington and Gloucester counties

In most cases, officials have relied totally on air test results.

This latest "crossed wire" was caused by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which says it is trying to clear the air nationwide about the issue of asbestos in schools.

As part of a new coordinating effort to be announced next month, EPA will recommend that school districts test: actual samples of suspect ceiling and wall material.

AGENCY officials claim this so-called "bulk" testing method will give a better reading because asbestos in public buildings is usually contained in a sprayed-on paint mixture, and its fibers can't normally be detected in the air.

Murray Kantz, a Northeast regional director of EPA's hazardous air pollution program, said the airborne test — and the exposure standards applied to it — originally were set up only to examine the atmosphere of industrial facilities where asbestos is manufactured or used.

"It's not applicable to school situations," he said. Kantz added that the bulk method is also five times cheaper than the air test, ranging in cost up to \$100.

Much of the research that led to EPA's latest move was conducted by Martin Rustein, a geochemist at New York State College in New York. Rustein termed the air test approach an "inaccurate gimmick."

Continued on Page 11—Oct. 1

Continued from Page 9

But William Rossmagel, president of Rossmagel Associates in Cherry Hill, defended it, claiming his position is supported by other experts and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health.

"IT'S THE only real numerical, analytical method we know of telling what the exposure is," said Rossmagel, whose firm has examined most locally affected schools and many others around the country. "At certain times, you need both (tests). With those real low numbers (from air tests), it's safe. I don't think school officials should panic."

But area educators feel they're in the middle, and questions linger.

"I just wonder which way they want to make it go," said James Walsh, business administrator for the Cherry Hill School District.

Walsh said a series of follow-up air tests at Cherry Hill East and West high schools and Brainerd Junior High School last December turned up safe levels of the substance. "But if this (EPA action) means we're not getting good results, we'll certainly have to do something to make sure we do."

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New plan is outlined for asbestos

Gannett News Service

NEW YORK — The Environmental Protection Agency will recommend next month that school districts faced with potential problems with asbestos in their buildings ignore the only federal safety guidelines available and utilize a new program instead.

The EPA also is planning to discredit the kind of test for airborne asbestos that has been relied on in many public buildings.

The existing federal safety guidelines for asbestos in the air were established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

Marcus Kantz, coordinator of the EPA's program to set national emission standards for hazardous air pollutants, told the Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal Wednesday that school districts nationwide soon will be told to ignore these limits because they apply only to industrial conditions.

Asbestos is a carcinogen that can cause lung disease or several types of cancer when inhaled or ingested. It was a popular building material used routinely between the 1950s and early 1970s as a fireproofing, acoustic and insulating agent.

Thousands of public facilities across the nation are believed to contain asbestos materials.

Several school districts have determined that their conditions were safe, based on ambient air tests conducted by a New Jersey firm that relied on OSHA standards in its assessment. In this test, airborne asbestos is measured in an area using a vacuum pump and filter over a specific period of time.

Last month, however, Martin Rut-

Continued on Page 8—Col. 1

Asbestos program outlined

Continued from Page One

stein, chairman of the geology department at the New York State University College in New Paltz, challenged the firm's findings based on his own tests using a different method.

His findings initially were criticized by the school superintendent there, but he succeeded in convincing the board of education that conditions posed a potential health threat to students and staff. The board since has voted to repair the ceilings. Preliminary cost estimates have run as high as \$100,000.

Kantz said Rutstein's so-called "bulk" method of testing, in which samples are taken from a potential asbestos source and examined microscopically, should be used rather than the ambient air test methods.

In explaining the EPA's dismissal of air testing methods and the OSHA standards, he said, "It would be more useful for school boards to ignore these standards since there are so many uncertainties surrounding asbestos."

"We're not dealing with gray areas here — these are black areas of understanding. The simple fact is that asbestos is a carcinogen, and there are no known safe levels. Unnecessary exposure should be eliminated while necessary exposure should be minimized."

He said that the only "necessary" exposure would be in places where school districts are too poor to underwrite the cost of remedial measures.

Solutions for districts facing asbestos problems will not be cheap, Kantz said, adding that the EPA regards sealing of damaged asbestos surfaces or installing drop ceilings beneath such surfaces as only a temporary solution. Ultimately, removal may well be called for, he said.

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