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Accuracy of asbestos test on school questioned

By G. C. LERNER
Of The BCT Staff

EDGEWATER PARK — Despite encouraging results of recent asbestos ceiling tests at the Magowan School on Cherrix Street, the building may be in more trouble than its administrators think.

There's no question about tests results. When Rossnagel & Associates of Cherry Hill examined the ceilings last month, their tests showed that no significant hazard from asbestos particles existed.

But, it turns out, their tests were taken under such selective and controlled conditions, that with a change of timing or technique, they might have discovered a different set of results.

The tests (collection of air samples over a four-to-six hour period) were accomplished —

...when no children were present in the building, so that the atmosphere was not being disturbed.

...the ceilings, even those with gaping holes caused by recent water damage, were not disturbed or touched prior to the state of the tests.

...there was no normal traffic or air movement, as when students are in classes or crowding through halls.

Any activity which would have dislodged asbestos particles and caused them to become airborne was curtailed during the testing period. "All factors considered, it's better to test when no one is present because then we don't have any tampering or vandalizing of the testing equipment," said William Rossnagel, president of the testing firm.

He denied that testing during a normal school day would be "more accurate." He said, "I don't agree, since asbestos stays airborne for quite a while after a room is vacated.

"To test while children were present would require more people (at the

testing site), and that would be costly.

Edmond Drazga, president of KRC Research Inc., a Moorestown chemical testing firm, disagrees. "Those tests were not representative of what was happening in those areas.

"You can have asbestos lying on the floor of a room, but if it isn't being disturbed it doesn't become airborne, so the sampling result will not reflect what is present in the air," he said.

Drazga said tests should be taken under normal traffic conditions in a room or hallway.

Rossnagel said, "An asbestos ceiling which is not disturbed or has not been vandalized, and is not flaking or powdering, is perfectly safe." Drazga agreed.

At the Magowan School, several ceilings which contain asbestos have huge holes caused by January's heavy rains.

"Our personnel swept up the part of the ceilings that fell, and the rest was intact," said Walter Dold, school superintendent.

Chemist T. Casey III, a Rossnagel employee who conducted the tests at Magowan, said that a filter containing 171,000 separate fields (tiny squares) is used to collect the air samples for a test.

"We analyze a random sampling of 100 fields from the 171,000 to determine the asbestos content," Casey said.

He acknowledged that a different grouping of 100 fields taken from the same filter "could produce a different result."

Asked if the count could be different if a ceiling was disturbed by rubbing prior to the test, he replied "Yes."

It was the school board's action which led to the tests before a deci-

sion is reached to "consolidate" the Magowan and the Anne C. Jacques School into one.

The plan is to partially close the Jacques building and move those kindergarten through second grade students into the Magowan School.

According to Superintendent Walter Dold, neither the Ridgway nor the Jacques Schools have asbestos ceilings. At Ridgway, the ceilings are composed of dropped panels, while Jacques has wooden ceilings.

At Magowan, the older section of the school, built in 1955 has no asbestos ceilings, only block tiles. It's the newer section, constructed in 1960, that contains asbestos in the ceilings, he said.

It has been known for years, according to Dold, that some of the ceilings contain asbestos.

The first tests were conducted in 1977.

"It would have been easier for us to ignore it, but we have the safety of the kids in mind," said Dold.

He said tests will be conducted every other year, more often if necessary or if more damages occur.

"Our motives have been to allay fears, not create them among the parents or faculty," Dold said.

Rossnagel said, "Kids who vandalize the ceilings (by throwing objects or dragging something across the ceilings) should be disciplined. At least 95 percent of the vandalism problems is caused by the students, even in elementary schools."

He added, "If ceilings with asbestos are disturbed by accident or deliberately, or by someone repairing lighting fixtures, for example, then a meeting should be held and a decision made. The cost of removing those ceilings is terribly expensive."