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By Susan Mannella
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Students and teachers who were in Northview Heights Elementary School 15 years ago when an asbestos coating was sprayed on the ceilings face a much higher health risk than this year's pupils.

Asbestos experts gave that news to more than 200 parents yesterday, but many of them, confused and upset about possible effects on their children, weren't satisfied with explanations that hazards for them are minimal.

Superintendent Richard C. Wallace Jr. said the district will contact students and staff members who were in the building in 1965, when the asbestos coating was sprayed on ceilings in an addition that houses the gym, main lobby and classrooms.

He said X-rays or whatever tests are necessary will be administered.

Health experts who spoke at yesterday's meeting said the tests are not necessary for current pupils because levels of asbestos found during tests this week are 100 times below acceptable levels.

They sometimes had to scream over the voices of parents who disputed their conclusions during the two-hour meeting.

One parent, Annie Parks, left the meeting near tears. She was upset, she said, because she still doesn't know what the chances are that traces of asbestos are trapped inside the bodies of her children and because many of the most vocal parents at the meeting were more concerned about the reassignment plan.

"We are concerned about the busing and the time schedule and everything else. But I can be concerned about that tomorrow," she said.

"I'm concerned today about asbestos and whether or not it got into the bodies of our children. The rest of this stuff is trivial."

Concern about former pupils and teachers also was raised when Bea Jonseof, who taught health and physical education at Northview for 17 years, said she remembered standing around with other employees watching workers spray the asbestos.



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Asbestos, until recently used extensively for insulation and improved acoustics, has been identified as a cancer-causing substance.

Jonseof said the workers did not wear protective masks. Although pupils were not attending classes in that part of the building during the work, she said she was worried because they were nearby

and vents were circulating air throughout the school.

David Parkinson, a former pediatrician and now associate professor of industrial health at the University of Pittsburgh, said the levels of asbestos in the air during spraying "are exceedingly

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Pupils ran higher asbestos risk 15 years ago

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high" and he said methods used in the past were "very irresponsible."

He said that in some places, 50 percent of asbestos workers will die from related diseases.

He said the levels of asbestos inside the school now pose only a "very slight risk."

Because of that risk, though, Parkinson said he supported Wallace's decision to close the 16-year-old Northside elementary school for three to four months while ceilings are stripped and retiled.

In the interim, most of Northview's 534 pupils will attend classes at Wightman Elementary School in Squirrel Hill, which was closed in June.

Head Start and kindergarten classes

will be held at the Ernest T. Williams Jr. Memorial Center in Northview Heights.

Abbas Labbauf, an occupational and environmental health consultant for the Penn Environmental Health Co., said air samples he collected this week were 100 times below levels considered acceptable by the Occupational, Health and Safety Administration.

Parkinson said given the levels reported, there is a very slight risk that in 30 or 35 years, one child from the building could develop cancer in the lining of the lungs. He said there was absolutely no danger at those levels that any children would develop lung cancer or asbestosis, a scarring of the lungs.

But many of the parents said they are

afraid the effects of asbestos on children may be higher than research indicates because most tests have been conducted on adults.

Parkinson said he thinks it would be irresponsible and unnecessary to administer X-rays to present pupils because of the low asbestos levels and because disease from exposure takes years to develop. No signs would be apparent.

Some parents were more upset about the half-hour bus ride their children will take to Wightman school and a change in school hours that was made because no school buses were available at the regular time. Classes will run from 8:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. compared with Northview's starting time of 8:40.

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FD-1382

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