8 Schools in Jersey Are Closed To Check Asbestos-Fiber Levels

State Hires Scientists to Make Air-Quality Tests —Some Parents Say Children Became Ill

By ALFONSO A. NARVAEZ
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HOWELL TOWNSHIP, N.J., Jan. 3—The eight elementary schools of this Monmouth County community were closed today while scientists, hired by the State Department of Environmental Protection, made tests to determine if there were dangerous levels of asbestos fibers present in the corridors and classrooms.

The local Board of Education ordered the schools closed at an emergency meeting late last night after parents of some of the 4,500 elementary school children threatened to boycott classes until asbestos-containing materials coating the ceilings and corridors of four of the schools were removed. Two of the other schools have similar materials coating the ceilings of the cafeteria or entrance to the building.

The board will meet again tomorrow night to go over the preliminary results of the air-quality tests and decide whether to open the schools or to keep four or more of them closed until the asbestos-containing material is removed. The children would go on a split session.

Parents had expected the ceilings to be removed during the Christmas holidays, but the Board of Education, in a 5-to-3 vote, decided to wait until the summer to have the work done.

At least one child has been reported ill, allegedly because of the airborne asbestos fibers, while parents of dozens of other children have reported unexplainable ailments, such as headaches, sore throats and respiratory congestion.

'A Health Hazard'

Howard H. Clark, president of the Howell Township Board of Education, who had voted to go ahead with the work, said that he felt that the presence of the asbestos materials in the schools "is definitely a health hazard." He said that dozens of parents had called him to say that their children had been ill with unexplainable respiratory ailments.

"I will not send my children here until the ceilings have been taken down," Mr. Clark said.

He added that the materials had been sprayed on the ceilings when the buildings were constructed in the early 1960's, but that the parents had become concerned a few months ago after reading of a possible link between respiratory cancer and asbestos.

He said that older boys in the school, which runs from kindergarten to eighth grade, had scraped the eight-foot-high ceilings of the corridors with rulers or sticks, then had jumped up and grabbed handfuls of the material, which they threw in the faces of other children.

To them it looks like cotton candy," Mr. Clark said.

While the material may appear to be harmless, one of the parents, Irene Sarraf, feels that it has been the cause of serious ailments suffered by her three children.

Pediatrician Suspects Asbestos

She said that her 13-year-old son, Joseph, had been acutely ill recently and [illegible] pediatrician said that the little boy could possibly be airborne particles of asbestos.

She said [illegible] about 25 to 30 parents who told me that their children have been suffering from eye aches, headaches, sore throats or itchiness," Mrs. Sarraf said. "But none have suffered as much as Joseph. At times his neck glands are out bigger than his face."

Mrs. Sarraf said that her children were fine during the summer months, but that when they were in school the mysterious ailments began.

"We've been through all sorts of allergy tests, and nothing was conclusive," she said. "We've been complaining for some time to school officials, and I think it's time that some of the other parents come out and join me on this."

Two Sarraf children attend the Ramtown Elementary School, where scientists have set up six air-monitoring samplers that filter the air.

William B. Rossnagel, who is a professional engineer and president of the Cherry Hill firm of Rossnagel and Associates—which is doing the air-sampling for the Department of Environmental Protection—said that his firm had conducted tests in about 30 schools that use asbestos coatings for fireproofing or for absorbing noise.

"This is the worst I've seen," he said, surveying the ceiling of the Ramtown school's corridors.

The coating on the ceilings was flaking off in many areas and the floor was coated with a fine white powder and puffs of asbestos material.



The New York Times/Frank C. Dougherty

Parents at Ramtown School in Howell Township, N.J., pointing to a ceiling from which asbestos has flaked and fallen onto runner, right.



Irene Sarraf at home with sons, Joseph and Ronald, who both attend Ramtown School

PLAINTIFF'S EXHIBIT

BOND-239