Poisoned Water in Newark Schools

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Newark Public Schools recently acknowledged that the water at its schools has contained high levels of lead for years. This is shocking but, sadly, not surprising given the neglect of public schools, especially those in poor communities, by Congress and state governments.

Last week Newark officials [began offering blood tests](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/nyregion/newark-begins-testing-childrens-lead-levels-amid-rising-anxiety.html) for elevated lead levels in students after tests showed that drinking water at 30 of the district’s 67 schools exceeded the safety threshold established by the Environmental Protection Agency. But even levels below that standard — 15 parts per billion — are not acceptable. Public health experts say there is no safe amount of lead in water and that children exposed to the heavy metal can suffer [irreversible damage](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs379/en/) to the neurological system.

The Newark district found high lead levels in water samples taken over the past four years and has promised to release the results from earlier years. District officials were aware of the hazard [as early as 2004](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/nyregion/newark-school-officials-to-offer-lead-testing-to-youngest-students.html), and some steps, like installing water filters, were taken over the years.

1. What is the safe amount of lead in water for children?

There are striking parallels *(similarities)* between Newark schools and the city of Flint, Mich., which is also struggling with a lead crisis. Both are distressed, both have a large minority population, and both are subject to [state control](https://www.cityofflint.com/rtab/) — in the Newark school district’s case, for more than [20 years](http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/13/nyregion/taking-control-state-ousts-newark-s-school-officials.html). Gov. Chris Christie’s administration needs to respond immediately, providing bottled water to the schools and figuring out how many children have been harmed.

The state should also investigate what previous superintendents did in response to elevated lead levels and why results from earlier tests were not made public. If the state is unable or unwilling to do that, federal officials should step in. Last week, federal court filings in New York City revealed that the United States attorney’s office in Manhattan [is investigating](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/nyregion/us-investigating-elevated-blood-lead-levels-in-new-yorks-public-housing.html) elevated blood lead levels in residents of the city’s public housing and homeless shelters.

2) What are some of the similarities between the Newark schools case and the Flint Michigan case?

Lead in the water, which often comes from water lines and plumbing fixtures, has been a hazard in school districts around the country, including those of [Washington](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/14/AR2007021401678.html), D.C.; [Seattle;](http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/above-normal-levels-of-lead-found-in-seattle-schools-water/) and [Los Angeles](http://www.nbclosangeles.com/investigations/children-could-be-drinking-tainted-water-nbc4-investigation-exposed-292465681.html). Baltimore’s has used [bottled water](http://www.npr.org/2016/03/16/470512927/before-flint-lead-contaminated-water-plagued-schools-across-u-s) for drinking and cooking since 2007. [Schools in Camden](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/12/nyregion/newark-officials-knew-of-lead-risk-in-schools-water-in-2014.html), N.J., have been on bottled water for 14 years.

Since most school buildings in cities are old, they tend to have plumbing with significant amounts of lead. It was not until 1986 that Congress set the maximum level of lead in pipes and fixtures at 8 percent, a standard unchanged until [Congress lowered it](https://www.epa.gov/dwstandardsregulations/section-1417-safe-drinking-water-act-prohibition-use-lead-pipes-solder-and) to 0.25 percent [starting in 2014](https://www.congress.gov/111/plaws/publ380/PLAW-111publ380.pdf).

Yet federal law [does not require](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20359990) schools to test their water if they get it from a public water utility, which most schools do. This needs to change. Congress and state legislatures should pass laws requiring regular testing for lead and that the results are made public.

When contamination is detected, school districts will need money and expertise from federal and state agencies to fix the problem. It is absolutely unacceptable that public schools, very often in the poorest communities, may be poisoning their children.

1. Do you think Congress should have acted sooner to ban lead pipes? Why or why not?

**Schools Nationwide Still Grapple With Lead in Water**

JERSEY CITY — Anxious parents may wonder how a major school system like Newark’s could overlook lead in the drinking water of 30 schools and 17,000 students. The answer: It was easy. They had to look only a few miles away, at the century-old classrooms of the schools here, across the Hackensack River.

The [Jersey City Public Schools](http://www.jcboe.org/boe2015/) district discovered lead contamination in eight schools’ drinking fountains in 2006, and in more schools in 2008, 2010 and 2012. But not until 2013 did officials finally chart a comprehensive attack on lead, which by then had struck all but six schools.

In Newark, where school officials disclosed [elevated lead levels](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/nyregion/elevated-lead-levels-found-in-newark-schools-drinking-water.html) earlier this month, Mr. Barrett’s firm began testing water systemwide on March 19. Students at the 30 schools now drink bottled water, and the youngest students were [offered free blood tests](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/nyregion/newark-school-officials-to-offer-lead-testing-to-youngest-students.html).

There, as in Los Angeles, high lead levels persisted even though workers flush the water pipes every weekday to push out lead that accumulates overnight. Nor did some filters on Newark school fountains reduce contamination sufficiently.

4) What are some of the cities that have been affected by high lead levels in public schools?

In New York City, officials have uprooted and replaced all lead pipes leading from water mains into schools, swiftly replaced equipment when tests showed high lead levels, and ordered weekly pipe flushing at any school with a violation. All schools’ water is regularly tested. The result? Only 1.3 percent of nearly 90,000 water tests have exceeded the city’s lead threshold. The program is “a model for the nation,” said Dr. Philip Landrigan, an expert on lead and a professor of [preventive medicine](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/specialtopic/preventive-health-care/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) and pediatrics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

5) What did New York City do to ensure that the water in public schools was safe from lead?

6) How do you think the state of New Jersey should address the lead problem?

7) What do you think citizens can do to hold the government accountable that the water they drink is safe?