

ENVIRONMENTAL HOME

As kids head back to school, mold could await

By Dan Howard

FOR TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

In thousands of homes and on social media posts across the land, you saw the annual notices heralding the end of summer vacation: the kids are back in school.

The sad news is that the “welcome back students” message has been accompanied with too many news stories about mold being found in our nation’s schools. It is not an accident that September is “National Mold Awareness Month.”

The bottom line is that parents don’t want their children sick because they go to school. Our schools that have mold are like the “Jaws” movies. Just when you think it is safe to return, we find out that it is not so safe.

When we experience any school environmental issue, such as mold, it can be front-page headlines, TV talk show fodder and Facebook news feed material.

Environmental issues in schools are not just another student health issue. These problems are a public-relations nightmare, a staff human relations minefield, a facility management challenge, a budget buster, a political fiasco and a liability time bomb.

Signs of mold in school

If a school is flooded or has leaks that are not quickly cleaned up, there will be mold. Whether it is a roof leak, plumbing leak or any other area of wet surfaces, you can count on mold growing.

Parents should take a look around their child’s school. Water stains are the target to look for. Fuzzy or splotchy areas are the bulls-eye in the search for suspected mold. These can be in almost any area of a building from the highest ceiling to the lowest floor.

In addition to the visual indicators of mold presence, odor can be an indicator. When the odor of mold is in the school or on a child’s clothes, books, papers or possessions, mold should be investigated as a source of the offensive smell.

Sewage backups, leaks and all floods have a host of water-borne diseases and contaminants. When these occur, a professional disinfection must be conducted, even when mold is not visible. Even a little dust left in an obscure corner after the flood is gone can enter through a cut in a student’s hand or through their lungs long after the water is gone if the area has not been disinfected.



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The EPA offers online tools explaining the issues and solutions to mold problems.

Mold is a science project

Though not part of the approved school curriculum, mold that is found in the school is really a science experiment. Anywhere on Earth that there is food and water, something will grow. It can be the deepest ocean or highest mountain. It can be the North Pole or South Pole or anywhere in between.

The scientific fact is that books, paper, wood floors, drywall, dust, or any other material or any other substrate that can grow mold will grow mold within 48 hours of leaks or high moisture occurring. The most common sources of mold problems in a school are:

- Roof, wall foundation or other leaks from the exterior
- Plumbing leaks
- Malfunctioning or poorly designed HVAC systems
- Condensation issues caused by improper temperatures and humidity being maintained
- Floods

The first step in preventing a recurrence of mold is determining the conditions that were mold conducive. If mold grew in a school over the summer because the air conditioning was not run, or there are roof leaks, or any other reason, it will return if the cause of mold is not corrected.

Failure to correct the underlying cause of

environmental hazards, as well as the hazard itself, is a waste of money and serves to mislead parents, administration and faculty into believing that the school mold environment is safe.

In school, we learned to consider both cause and effect. The same applies in the process of creating healthy indoor air quality.

Schools can get help to keep our children safe from mold

The Environmental Protection Agency provides great online tools to learn the issues and solutions to mold problems. These are great general guidelines, but can’t address individual conditions. Mold problems often are complicated because they are the result of several underlying conditions that require expertise in multiple construction fields.

Unfortunately, learning to use and implement these tools is often much tougher than obtaining them. Professional assistance is a good option to get an environmental awareness and mold prevention program up and running properly.

Once established, existing staff usually can keep the program running.

Usually, an indoor air quality program process starts with an initial site assessment or information gathering session. The envi-

ronmental risks are evaluated and appropriate tests are conducted. These could include mold and allergen testing. If there was flooding or a sewage backup, testing for a number of common infectious diseases should be added.

An educational staff can’t be expected to have the full knowledge to implement a program, but often, once in place, the good health of school occupants can be maintained through the adjustments made in the facility.

There are several companies that have assessment and monitoring programs that include a yearly Indoor Air Quality Certificate for posting after the assessment and completion of any appropriate testing and corrections.

School district participation in an environmental awareness and preventive care program can pay for itself in lower medical costs, lower property repair costs and better long-term health of students and staff. The other benefit is peace of mind for parents, particularly in schools that have had prior mold problems.

For links, resources and information about mold testing, landmines and reliable sources, go to: Envirospect.info/MoldinSchools.

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