Get the Lead Out

Back to School Toolkit

CALPIRG Education Fund

ENVIRONMENT CALIFORNIA
RESEARCH & POLICY CENTER
Our children need safe drinking water—especially at school where they go to learn and play each day. Unfortunately, lead is contaminating drinking water at schools and pre-schools across the country.

The problem stems from pipes, plumbing, faucets and fixtures that contain lead. The common-sense solution is to “get the lead out” of schools’ water delivery systems.

This “back to school” toolkit helps parents, teachers, and school officials address this issue in four ways:

- Get the Facts
- Spread the Word
- Take Action
- Access Additional Resources
Factsheet on lead in schools’ drinking water

The problem

We now know the toxic threat of lead in drinking water extends to thousands of communities across the country. In fact, lead is even contaminating drinking water in schools and pre-schools—flowing from fountains and faucets where our kids drink water every day.

**Lead is highly toxic, especially for children**

A potent neurotoxin, lead affects how our children learn, grow, and behave. According to EPA, “In children, low levels of [lead] exposure have been linked to damage to the central and peripheral nervous system, learning disabilities, shorter stature, impaired hearing, and impaired formation and function of blood cells.”

**There is no safe level of lead.**

“EPA has set the maximum contaminant level goal for lead in drinking water at zero because lead is a toxic metal that can be harmful to human health even at low exposure levels.” In fact, medical researchers estimate that more than 24 million children in America today risk losing IQ points due to low levels of lead. ADHD, anxiety and depression are also linked to exposure of even very low levels of lead.

**Lead is contaminating drinking water at schools.**

California schools were required to test their water for lead by Summer 2019, and so far water contaminated with lead has been found in all kinds of communities—from rural towns to major cities, and affluent suburbs. A few schools found incredibly high levels. For example, a drinking fountain at Marjorie H. Tobias Elementary School in San Mateo reported over 1900 parts per billion of lead, a gym water fountain at the International Studies School in Chinatown, San Francisco found 960 PPB and an elementary school in Hanford found 800 PPB. More than seventeen hundred drinking fountains found lead at over 5 PPB in their drinking water. See our map of results so far here: [http://gettheleadout.calpirg.org](http://gettheleadout.calpirg.org).

In all likelihood, the confirmed cases of lead in schools' water is just the tip of the iceberg. Any school built before 2014 is likely to have significant lead in its pipes, plumbing, and/or fixtures. And where there is lead, there is risk of contamination.

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3 The Role of Lead Exposure on Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Children: A Systematic Review.

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Solutions

Install filters now: Installing filters on all taps used for drinking and cooking is an easy, low-cost step schools can take to start protecting children immediately. Make sure the filters are installed at “point of use” and certified to remove lead.

Get the lead out: Replacing pipes, plumbing, fountains and/or fixtures that contain lead is the most effective, permanent solution to prevent contamination of the water our children drink at school (or elsewhere).

Remove lead service lines: If the pipe connecting your school (or home or child care center) to the water main in the street is made of lead, that lead service line is likely to be the largest single source of water contamination. Have it replaced as soon as possible.

Doctor’s orders — 1 part per billion (ppb): The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that schools keep lead concentrations in water no greater than 1 ppb. Taps used for drinking or cooking that test above 1 ppb of lead should be shut off until remediated.

Understanding test results and limitations

While it is good news that more and more school districts are testing their water, it is highly likely that lead contamination extends beyond confirmed test results. Here is what you need to know about testing:

Lead corrosion is highly variable. As a result, tests sometimes fail to detect lead—or the full extent of lead—in water, especially when sampling is done improperly.

Share all your work with the class. Sometimes officials or the media only report lead levels in water that exceed 15 parts per billion (ppb). But there is no safe level of lead for children. Ask to see all test results detecting any level of lead in the water.

Cheating on the test? Contamination tends to be higher the longer water sits in contact with lead-bearing pipes or fixtures. So samples taken after flushing of the system, or even regular water use, are unlikely to detect the full extent of lead contamination at school.

Act now to protect children’s health. We already know that wherever there is lead in a water delivery system, there is a risk of contamination. Schools should not wait for test results before taking action to protect our children’s health.

Contact:
Laura Deehan, CALPIRG Education Fund Public Health Advocate
laura@calpirg.org, 415 420 4710
Advocacy tools

Find out about lead at your school

Contact the parent-teacher association (PTA) at your school and share this toolkit. Then working with the PTA, ask your school’s principal, superintendent, or school board the following questions:

1. What year was [your school] built? If your school’s fountains, faucets or plumbing were installed before 2014, there is a significantly higher risk that the water is being contaminated with lead.

2. Has the drinking water at [your school] been tested for lead? If so, where can I access the full results, including tests where any level of lead was detected?

3. What policies does [your school/school district] have in place to prevent lead contamination of water?

Twitter

And if you are on Twitter, here are some sample tweets to help raise visibility online:

As @[yourtown] goes #backtoschool, we know kids run better unled. Help #GetTheLeadOut of water at our schools.

Contaminated water @[yourtown] schools? Time for @[LOCAL DECISIONMAKER] to #GetTheLeadOut. [INSERT LINK TO YOUR LOCAL PETITION]

There’s no safe level of lead. As our children head #backtoschool, get the facts on safe drinking water from @EnvCalifornia @CALPIRG

https://calpirg.org/feature/cap/get-lead-out

As our kids head #backtoschool, here’s a quick homework assignment for parents: watch this video about lead in schools’ drinking water. https://bit.ly/2n4R4LM

Spread the word

Video

To help spread awareness, here is a short video about lead in schools’ drinking water that you can share and like on Facebook and other social media: https://bit.ly/2n4R4LM

It affects how our kids

LEARN

DEVELOP

BEHAVE
Sample letters to the editor

(TIPS: if possible, write your letter in response to a recent article. Adhere to word limits (if any), provide requested contact information, and call the paper make the case for your letter being printed.)

#1. If your school/district has already tested for lead:

To the Editor:

Thank you for your recent piece on the “back to school” season (INSERT TITLE AND DATE OF RELEVANT NEWS STORY). Here’s one challenge that parents and children should never have to worry about when headed back to school: lead in drinking water.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that impairs how children learn, grow, and behave. Yet from tests done last year, we now know that there is lead in our schools’ drinking water here in [COMMUNITY]. Moreover, because tests often fail to detect lead in water, the threat to our children’s health is likely more pervasive than the results show.

To protect our children’s health, here is a “back to school” homework assignment for [COMMUNITY]: let’s work together to get the lead out. We can start by immediately installing filters certified to remove lead on faucets and fountains in our schools. We’ll also need to replace the lead pipes, solder, and fixtures that cause the contamination in the first place. Meanwhile, let’s shut off taps where lead in water exceeds one part per billion, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Our children deserve safe drinking water at school. Let’s get to work.

Sincerely,

[NAME]
[OTHER REQUIRED INFO]

#2. If your school/district has not tested for lead:

To the Editor:

Thank you for your recent piece on the “back to school” season (INSERT TITLE AND DATE OF RELEVANT NEWS STORY). Here’s one challenge that parents and children should never have to worry about when headed back to school: lead in drinking water.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that impairs how children learn, grow, and behave. In the wake of the tragedy in Flint, Michigan, more schools across the country are testing their water. And all too often, they are finding lead flowing from faucets and fountains where children drink.

Like most communities, [COMMUNITY’s] schools have plumbing and fixtures made with lead. So even without any testing, there is every reason to believe that lead is contaminating water at our schools as well.

So here is a “back to school” homework assignment for [COMMUNITY]: let’s work together to get the lead out. We can start by immediately installing filters certified to remove lead on faucets and fountains in our schools. We’ll also need to replace the lead pipes, solder, and fixtures that cause the contamination in the first place. Meanwhile, let’s shut off taps where lead in water exceeds one part per billion, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Our children deserve safe drinking water at school. Let’s get to work.

Sincerely,

[NAME]
[OTHER REQUIRED INFO]
Sample petition to your school board

Dear School Board,

We are calling on you to ensure lead-free drinking water for children in our schools. Lead is a potent neurotoxin that harms our children’s health. Our schools have already detected lead in water at some outlets, and because most schools have lead in their plumbing or fixtures, the problem is likely even more pervasive. We urge you to adopt strong policies to protect our children’s health—including filters on taps at school, removing lead-bearing parts, and shutting off taps where lead exceeds 1 part per billion, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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Dear School Board,

We are calling on you to ensure lead-free drinking water for children in our schools. Lead is a potent neurotoxin that harms our children’s health. Yet schools across the country are finding lead in their drinking water.

While our schools have not yet tested for lead, virtually all schools have lead in their plumbing or fixtures, and so it is quite likely our children’s water is at risk. We urge you to adopt strong policies to protect our children’s health – testing for lead in drinking water, including filters on taps at school, removing lead-bearing parts, and shutting off taps where lead exceeds 1 part per billion, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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Overview:
Our most recent national Get the Lead Out report (2019)

Likelihood of lead contamination at your school:
• Until 2010, California standards allowed plumbing, faucets, and fixtures to have a weighted average of 8 percent of surface area in contact with water made of lead. So unless your school has brand new plumbing and fixtures, it is highly likely that its water is in contact with significant amounts of lead before it is used for drinking or cooking.

• As more schools test, they are finding lead in their water.

Lead in water is harmful, even at low levels:
• American Academy of Pediatrics, Policy Statement on Prevention of Childhood Lead Toxicity (June 2016) (urging officials to ensure that lead concentrations in schools’ drinking water is no greater than 1 part per billion)

• U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Basic Information About Lead in Drinking Water, including Is There a Safe Level of Lead in Drinking Water? (“EPA has set the maximum contaminant level goal for lead in drinking water at zero because lead is a toxic metal that can be harmful to human health even at low exposure levels.”)

• EPA Never Said 15 ppb is Safe (quoting EPA official who helped set the 15 ppb standard).

Examples of schools and communities taking action:
• In 2017, San Diego Unified School District adopted a health based policy to protect kids from lead.

• In 2018, Oakland Unified School District adopted a plan to get the lead out of drinking water.

• Also in 2018, Berkeley Unified School District adopted a lead standard of no more than 1 PPB in the drinking water.

Proper testing and limitations:
• Virginia Tech Instructions to Flint Residents for Proper Water Sampling (no water use for at least 6 hours beforehand, three separate samples from each tap at timed intervals)

• EPA-Certified Labs to Send Water Samples

• Avoid Flushing Before Taking Samples (Without flushing, New York City schools found nine times as many outlets with high levels of lead so far.)

• Even a Few Tests Do Not Assure Water is Safe (quoting Dr. Marc Edwards, Virginia Tech)

• Sometimes test results are expressed in terms of ug/dL, which stands for micrograms per deciliter; 1 ug/dL equals 10 ppb (parts per billion).

Finding filters certified to remove lead:
• National Sanitation Foundation http://www.nsf.org/

• Water Quality Association - https://www.wqa.org/

• CSA - http://www.csagroup.org/industries/plumbing/drinking-water-requirements/