



Mold troubles more and more schools nationwide

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The discovery of mold this year in five of the town's public schools was hardly good news for the Greenwich Public Schools. But as school administrators went about the task of eliminating the fungus, they found themselves in good company. In the past 20 years, administrators said, air quality in general and mold in particular have become significant issues in public schools from coast to coast.

A recent report by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, estimated that 20 percent of the nation's public schools have air-quality problems, many of them due to mold. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reported in 1999 that 43 percent of American schools had experienced at least one air-quality problem in the preceding year.

The problem is so widespread that the Environmental Protection Agency created a program, Tools for Schools, specifically designed to help schools combat indoor air-quality issues. At least six of the Greenwich Public Schools -- Hamilton Avenue, North Street, Glenville, New Lebanon, North Mianus and Parkway -- will implement the program this year. In the past nine months, staff has discovered mold growing in five of the town's public schools -- Cos Cob, Hamilton Avenue, Parkway, Eastern Middle School and Arch Street.

The Connecticut Department of Education does not keep statistics on mold, but Thomas Murphy, a spoke-sman for the department, said it is a significant issue for the state's public schools. This summer alone, he said, mold was discovered in public schools in Cheshire, Hamden, Oxford, Seymour, West Haven and several other towns. At Daniels Farm Elementary School in Trumbull, the opening of school was delayed by one day last week after custodians found mold in some of the carpets. And in Fairfield, six classrooms in two elementary schools were closed Friday after tests indicated elevated levels of mold.

In nearly every case, Murphy said, custodians attributed the mold growth to the damp spring and humid summer. "When you have these types of conditions, it is absolutely essential to have good air circulation," Murphy said. "And sometimes that just couldn't happen." Mold needs little more than moisture to survive, with the fungus thriving in damp climates such as bathrooms, showers, locker rooms and kitchens. The only way to get rid of it, according to the EPA, is to thoroughly clean the area and eliminate the source of moisture.

Tony Vuozzo, president of AMC Technology, a Stratford environmental consulting firm that is working with the Greenwich Public Schools and other Connecticut school districts to eliminate mold, said this has been his busiest summer in memory. "It's almost like Mother Nature decided to encourage mold growth," he said. Humidity aside, Murphy said new trends in school construction have made schools fertile ground for mold.

In the past couple of decades, he said, school architects have begun favoring drywall, drop ceilings and carpeting -- materials that are hospitable to mold. "If you look back even (20 years), schools had tile floors, plaster ceilings, windows and plaster walls," Murphy said. "Today, architects and builders have been designing buildings with softer materials and more absorbent materials. . . . So the conditions in today's buildings have been more conducive for mold to grow."

That appears to be the case at Eastern Middle School, where custodians found mold in several classrooms last month. Nearly all of the mold was discovered on drywall in the building's new wing, completed in 2000, while comparatively little was found in the main building, completed in the mid-1950s with cinder block and plaster. A small patch of mold also was discovered during the summer at Cos Cob School, which was constructed in the early 1990s. But old buildings, too, can be breeding grounds for mold, particularly if they have leaky roofs, pipes or walls.

Hamilton Avenue School, where custodians found mold in January and again last month, appears to fit into that category. Custodians at the 90-year-old building found mold in a basement storage closet last winter. Last month, they detected mold spores that they believe developed in the school's carpet. Ironically, administrators believe that the latter problem began during the summer when a cleaning crew accidentally spilled some water on the dilapidated carpet -- creating the perfect environment for mold.

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