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Lead Levels in Schools' Water Prompt Warnings and Shut-Offs

By ROBERT F. WORTH

The New York City school system announced yesterday that it had shut off drinking fountains and posted warning signs on sinks at about one in five of its public elementary schools, after finding that the level of lead in the water slightly exceeded federal standards during tests completed last month.

The lead was found in water at 222 of the city's 990 elementary schools during tests that started in August. The levels were not high enough to pose a significant health risk, said David Chai, a spokesman for Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein.

The exact levels of lead in the water were not released yesterday, nor were the names of the affected schools. But officials began notifying parents, principals and unions at the schools by letter. Notices will also be posted in the schools.

All told, 298 sinks, used mainly for washing hands, and 254 drinking fountains were found to have water that exceeded the federal government's recommended safe level for drinking water, 20 parts per billion, Mr. Chai said. There is no apparent pattern among the affected schools, he said, but the source of the lead appeared to be old pipes.

The city began daily flushing of the water systems of all schools in August to minimize the possibility of lead in the water until each school had its water tested, officials said.

Water at the city's middle and high schools is now being tested. The tests, part of the city's first comprehensive school-water-testing program, are believed to be the most comprehensive tests in the nation, officials said. The only previous tests were in 1996, when water in some city schools was randomly sampled and tested for contamination, Mr. Chai said. The results of those tests were not available.

Ernest Clayton, the president of the United Parents Association of New York City, said, "I've got to give them credit for having it done, but for this to have gone unattended for so long is really a shame."

Many of the school buildings are a century old, he said, and the water in their pipes may have contained lead for decades.

Mr. Clayton said the association would advise parents to take their children from the affected schools to the doctor for blood tests.

Dick Riley, a spokesman for the United Federation of Teachers, said he had not yet

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seen the test results, but added that he hoped the city would fix the affected sinks and fountains as soon as possible.

Plumbing systems and fixtures once routinely used lead, but that is now prohibited, according to the Web site of the New York City Health Department. In buildings with old pipes, joints or fixtures, it can be released when the water is heated or sits in the pipes.

Lead can disrupt the growth and development of a child's brain and nervous system, and is most dangerous to children younger than 6. At high levels, it can damage the kidneys, blood and brain.

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