

...Lead crisis in the schools

From Page 1

Pat Christensen, a union rep at Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, says the mess is partly the result of decades of underfunding of maintenance. Christensen worked as a steamfitter for PPS for 22 years. Now he represents the 11 plumbers and 11 steamfitters still employed by the district, and he's president of the coalition of PPS trades unions known as the District Council of Unions (DCU). PPS employed 250 DCU members when Christensen started. Today it employs 84 — to maintain 78 schools serving 49,000 students.

"It means they're chasing emergencies, putting out fires," Christensen said.

"When I hired on there in 1988, they had the skills to build a school. They had everybody: carpenters, glazers, painters, laborers, electricians. We remodeled and did major projects during the summers."

But decades of cuts have made insufficient maintenance the new normal, Christensen said: "They continue to operate under this model of letting things deteriorate, and that concerns us."

At Creston and Rose City Park elementary schools, water tests found lead above the EPA's threshold at some locations. Subsequently, over 500 students at the two schools were screened. Two students were found to have lead levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter of blood, the level that the Centers for Disease Control calls elevated.

If that means the district

dodged a bullet, it may be because students are in school just six hours a day and 176 days a year, and are not necessarily drinking water from the school when they're there.

School employees are also concerned about lead in the drinking water, not just district parents. Belinda Reagan, president of 1,400-member Portland Federation of School Professionals (AFT Local 111) says she got dozens of emails and phone calls from concerned members after news stories about lead came out.

Local 111 has filed a grievance in response to the uproar. A clause in the union contract guarantees safe and healthy workplaces, and the union is asking as a remedy that the district offer lead testing to employees who wish to be tested.

The good news is that there's no mystery how to get lead out of the water — repiping, changing out fixtures, and installing filters.

"We're here to help," Christensen said. "If you can get us the funding, we'd like to send you more people."

To save the district money, Christensen has even proposed that the district use apprentices for some of the work, at a lower rate than journey-level workers.

But the lead scare points up the cost of cutting too many corners on maintenance.

"The idea that we were going to keep the cuts out of the classroom by cutting all around the classroom worked for a couple of years. Now it's been long enough that the effects of that are coming out."

What's lead doing in the water at schools?

Lead is a toxic metal that can accumulate in the body over time, and can harm human health even at low levels of exposure. In children, lead exposure can damage the central nervous system, impair hearing, and cause learning disabilities. Lead is common in plumbing systems installed prior to 1986 — in brass fixtures and the solder used to join pipes. When those materials corrode, lead can dissolve into water. Corrosion is greater in pipes carrying hot water,

and pipes where water sits for long periods of time. Like many other water systems, the Portland Water Bureau reduces corrosion by adding sodium hydroxide to raise the pH of the water. But there's no level at which lead is considered safe. The goal of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is that there be no lead in drinking water. When tap tested at residences finds lead at greater than 15 parts per billion, the EPA requires drinking water systems to take further measures.

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