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Advocates Say It's Time to Get the Lead out of School Drinking Water

Wisconsin Laws Get an "F" for Failing to Protect Kids from Lead-Laced Drinking Water in Schools

MADISON – Citing growing evidence of pervasive lead contamination in schools' drinking water, the WISPIRG Foundation today launched a new *Get the Lead Out* campaign. While highlighting positive steps taken by the Department of Natural Resources and cities across the state to remove lead pipes from schools, daycares and homes, [a new analysis](#) by the group gave Wisconsin's state laws a grade of "F" for failing to prevent children's drinking water from becoming laced with lead at school.

"Schools should be safe places for our kids to learn and play, but Wisconsin is not doing enough to protect our kids from lead in drinking water," **said Peter Skopec, WISPIRG Foundation Director**. "Kids' developing brains are especially susceptible to highly toxic lead. It's time to get the lead out."

Dr. Elizabeth Neary with the Wisconsin Environmental Health Network, Peng Her, Associate Director of the Center for Resilient Cities, and State Senator Chris Larson joined the WISPIRG Foundation in releasing the group's new report, [Get the Lead Out: Ensuring Safe Drinking Water for Our Children at School](#). The report was co-authored with the Wisconsin Environment Research and Policy Center.

As more Wisconsin schools voluntarily test their water, they are finding lead. Milwaukee Public Schools recently found that 183 of its drinking fountains tested above the federal threshold of 15 parts of lead per billion, for example. The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism [has reported](#) of troubling test results in Wausau and Middleton schools as well.

Such confirmed cases of lead-laced water are likely just the tip of the iceberg. For example, *Get the Lead Out* cites new data from Massachusetts, where half of more than 40,000 tests conducted last year showed some level of lead in water from taps at school.

"No parent should have to worry about their child drinking water that's contaminated with lead," **said State Senator Chris Larson (D-7, Milwaukee)**. "Lead pipes are a ticking time bomb, the danger is significant and immediate. As this report shows, it's crucial to get the lead out of schools, daycares, and homes. Our state must take significant and meaningful action to keep each Wisconsin child safe from lead in drinking water."

All too often, schools and homes have pipes, plumbing and/or fixtures that leach lead into drinking water. In some cases, old service lines – the pipes that bring water from the mains in the street into buildings – are made entirely of lead.

Unfortunately, current state law does far too little to prevent children’s drinking water from becoming laced with lead at school. Wisconsin relies heavily on inadequate federal laws to regulate lead in drinking water, and requires little or no testing, remediation or public disclosure:

- Wisconsin uses the federal “action level” of 15 parts per billion of lead per liter of water to determine lead contamination. This standard is widely regarded as being too high. There is no safe level of lead exposure, and children have been adversely impacted by far lower levels of contamination.
- The state does not require proactive steps to remove lead infrastructure from schools, nor does state policy mandate remediation in most cases when lead contamination has been detected in a school’s water.
- Wisconsin does not require most schools to test their drinking water for lead, and there is confusion over proper testing protocol in schools that check their systems voluntarily, as the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism [has reported](#).
- State law does not require schools to disclose to parents the existence of lead infrastructure in school buildings or the results of lead testing.

In the WISPIRG Foundation’s comparison of 16 states and the District of Columbia, these shortcomings gave Wisconsin a failing grade. While Wisconsin has taken important steps to get rid of lead infrastructure, including in schools and daycares, through the Department of Natural Resources’ \$14.5 million Safe Drinking Water Loan Program, these efforts do not make up for inadequate state laws and policies. 11 other states also received an “F” in the WISPIRG Foundation’s analysis.

“We were disappointed to find that Wisconsin’s state laws warrant an F for failing to protect children from lead at school,” **added Skopec**. “There are bright spots, like the DNR’s \$14.5 million program to remove lead service lines around the state, or Madison’s nationally leading effort to remove all lead infrastructure in the city between 2001 and 2010. But overall, we’re not doing enough to protect Wisconsin’s children. Our kids deserve better.”

You can read the full report, which was co-authored with Wisconsin Environment Research and Policy Center, at www.wispirgfoundation.org.

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