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Wisconsin gets an “F” for failing to address lead in school drinking water

New study finds urgent need for statewide action to protect children’s health

MADISON – Reacting to pervasive lead contamination in schools’ drinking water across the country and in Wisconsin, a new report gives Wisconsin’s policies an “F” for failing to protect children from lead exposure where they learn and play. The report, released today by Wisconsin Environment and WISPIRG, points to an urgent need to fund the removal of lead plumbing in schools and daycares, and calls for the creation of comprehensive policies to detect, disclose and remove lead from school drinking water.

“Schools should be safe places for our kids to learn and play, but Wisconsin is still failing to protect our kids from lead in drinking water,” **said Megan Severson, Wisconsin Environment State Director.** “State leaders should get serious about protecting kids from this toxic threat. Passing Gov. Evers’ budget to help fund lead service line removal would be a good place to start.”

Despite some positive efforts on the part of state and local leaders, Wisconsin showed poor progress in the second edition of the organizations’ *Get The Lead Out* study: the state had also received an “F” in 2017’s first edition of the report. The report finds that, across the board, Wisconsin still lacks comprehensive policies to detect, disclose and remove lead from school drinking water.

"All kids deserve clean, safe water to drink; it's a basic right," **said Margaret Leaf, a Madison-area mom of three elementary students.** "Parents shouldn't have to wonder if the drinking water is safe at our kids' schools. Wisconsin can and must do better."

Though Gov. Walker put \$26 million towards helping 42 communities replace lead service lines from 2017 to 2018, the *Get the Lead Out* study finds that Wisconsin has done far too little to prevent children’s drinking water from becoming laced with lead at school. Wisconsin Environment and WISPIRG urged the legislature to approve Gov. Evers’ \$40 million budget proposal to support lead service line removal. The groups also called on Assembly Speaker Vos’ newly-convened water quality taskforce and

Gov. Evers to develop comprehensive policies to deal with lead in drinking water - from effective lead testing to filtering at faucets and drinking fountains and replacing lead plumbing.

“While we’re glad to see state leaders taking note of this serious threat to children’s health, our report shows a troubling lack of progress” **said Peter Skopec, WISPIRG Director.** “It’s time for action. In addition to approving Gov. Evers’ budget proposal to help fund removal of lead service lines, state decisionmakers should act immediately to create strong policies that truly protect our kids from lead at school.”

Current state law is failing to prevent school drinking water from becoming contaminated with lead. *Get the Lead Out* finds that Wisconsin:

- Has no lead standard for water in schools and daycares;
- Does not require testing of school or daycare drinking water, or prescribe an effective testing protocol;
- Does not require remediation when lead is detected, or have a proactive plan to remove lead plumbing from schools or daycares; and
- Does not require public disclosure of test results or of remediation steps taken.

“Getting the lead out of drinking water is an act of caring for God’s gift to all of us,” **said Pastor Cindy Crane, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.** “We must protect those who are most vulnerable. Wisconsin’s children are counting on us.”

Most schools and pre-schools still have fountains or faucets that contain lead, and wherever there is lead, there is a risk of water contamination. Schools and daycares from Middleton to Wausau to Janesville to Wisconsin Rapids to Milwaukee have reported lead-contaminated drinking water - and these cases are likely just the tip of the iceberg. The picture from states that have done comprehensive testing is alarming: In Massachusetts, for example, more than half of the 43,000 school taps tested since 2016 showed lead in water.

“We were disappointed to find that Wisconsin’s efforts still put our state at the back of the class when it comes to protecting children from lead at school,” **concluded Severson.** “Our kids deserve better.”

Wisconsin Environment is dedicated to protecting our water, air and open spaces. We investigate problems, craft solutions, educate the public and decision-makers, and help the public make their voices heard in local, state and national debates over the quality of our environment and our lives.

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The Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group (WISPIRG) is a non-profit, non-partisan public interest advocacy organization that stands up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in democratic society.

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