

City of Milwaukee Health Department FAQ Response to April 10 Town Hall

This document outlines common questions raised by families during the April 10, 2025, MPS-MHD Town Hall related to lead hazards in schools. Responses below are provided by the City of Milwaukee Health Department (MHD) to clarify our role, actions, and current knowledge. We encourage families to also reach out directly to Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) for updates specific to remediation timelines, school operations, and student relocation.

Q: What are the health risks of lead exposure to children, and how soon after exposure should they be tested? **A:** Lead is a neurotoxin that can affect a child's brain development. It typically enters the body through ingestion (e.g., lead dust, paint chips). According to our partners at Children's Wisconsin, lead can show up in blood within days or weeks after exposure. A single blood test gives a snapshot of exposure within the last 30–90 days. If your child was exposed and tested negative, a retest is not usually necessary unless there is continued concern about ongoing exposure.

Q: What is MHD's role in this situation? **A:** MHD serves as the local enforcement agency for lead hazard violations. When unsafe conditions are found, MHD issues orders and continues to inspect school sites, evaluate remediation plans, and ensure that cleaning and containment efforts comply with both state and federal safety standards. Although Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) is responsible for maintaining its facilities, MHD collaborates with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) to monitor lead-related health risks.

Q: How do you determine whether a school is safe or unsafe? **A:** We assess schools based on visual inspections, environmental sampling (e.g., dust wipe tests), and compliance with Wisconsin Administrative Code DHS 163. If a hazard is found and remediation is required, we issue a formal order and confirm cleanup through post-abatement testing.

Q: Why were schools closed so suddenly? **A:** MHD does not take school closures lightly. Closures are recommended when hazards cannot be addressed while children and staff are in the building. The closure of Fernwood, for example, followed the identification of unsafe lead work performed by uncertified individuals without proper containment.

Q: Is MHD delaying or staggering inspections to help MPS not have to close more schools right now (nowhere to put/bus the kids)? **A:** No. MHD is not delaying or staggering inspections to influence school closure decisions. If a school is identified as having unsafe conditions, MHD takes appropriate action to recommend isolation of affected areas—or, if necessary, closure of the entire building—to protect students and staff. These decisions are based on health and safety concerns, not logistical limitations.

Q: Were children in school while unsafe work was being done? **A:** In some cases, yes. That is one reason MHD issued formal orders and initiated corrective action. Ongoing oversight is in place to ensure this does not happen again.

Q: Is this a chronic or acute issue? Should we continue to retest our kids? A: This situation is not considered chronic for most children unless there is continued exposure. A one-time test following exposure is generally sufficient. However, we support retesting if a parent or provider has concerns. All children should be tested at 12, 18, and 24 months, and annually until the age of 6.

Q: Why doesn't MHD release the number of children who tested positive for lead? Isn't that public health data? A: While aggregate public health data can often be shared, the screening clinic at Bradley Tech involved small enough numbers that releasing results could potentially identify individuals, which would violate HIPAA protections. When there are low numbers of children identified in a screening clinic, any kind of disclosure increases the chance that children could be identified. That is a federal right MHD takes seriously. We can confirm that no children screened during that event required immediate medical intervention.

Q: Is the lead only in dust, or are there other sources like water or soil? A: MHD has documented lead hazards in dust, paint, and in some cases, water fixtures. Many areas of Milwaukee have elevated soil lead levels due to the city's industrial history. We are working with MPS and DHS to address all relevant sources during assessments.

Q: What is MHD's policy on inspecting other MPS schools? Will you be expanding investigations beyond these seven schools? A: We are actively working with MPS on a plan that prioritizes inspections at schools built before 1978. We also respond to complaints submitted to our department. Under Milwaukee's Chapter 66 Ordinance, we have authority to investigate public and private buildings when a hazard is suspected.

Q: Can MHD test schools without a child first testing positive for lead? A: Yes. MHD has shifted its approach under Chapter 66 to allow proactive inspections when a lead hazard is suspected, rather than waiting for a confirmed poisoning.

Q: What happens after remediation is complete? A: MHD conducts clearance testing. Only when dust wipe results show safe levels will we approve the school for reoccupation. For Montessori schools, this process is more intensive due to the number of learning materials that must also be cleaned.

Q: Why hasn't MHD declared a public health emergency? A: MHD has taken aggressive enforcement action using our existing legal authority. While no formal emergency declaration has been issued, the department considers this a top priority and has reorganized our team's operations to respond accordingly.

Q: Will MHD provide ongoing updates? A: Yes. We will continue to update our lead investigation page (milwaukee.gov/MPS-Lead) with site visit reports, testing results, and FAQs. We are also planning additional screening clinics and outreach events.

Q: What are you doing to prevent this from happening again? A: MHD is working with MPS on a public Lead Action Plan that includes better protocols, staff training, and long-term inspection and maintenance schedules. We are also advocating for better funding and infrastructure investment.

If you have additional health-related questions, you can contact MHD directly through our website at www.milwaukee.gov/MPS-Lead.