



MERCURY SPILLS HIGHLIGHT DANGERS OF CHEMICALS IN SCHOOLS

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Recent mercury spills at a high school in the nation's capital underscore the need to remove dangerous and potentially deadly chemicals from U.S. schools.

Cardoza High School in Washington, D.C. remains closed and students are attending classes at a nearby university after Environmental Protection Agency officials discovered mercury, acids and other improperly stored chemicals.

"We found problems at Cardozo High School that go well beyond the initial mission of identifying mercury and removing it from the building. The mission has been expanded because there are other chemicals that create safety and hazardous conditions," Superintendent Clifford Janey told the Washington Times.

The school was initially closed last month after several students intentionally spilled mercury. One of the students charged in the incident said he found the toxic substance in the school. All three students charged will report to D.C. Superior Court on March 28.

Dangerous chemicals

Mercury, shiny, silver and odorless in its elemental form, is toxic. When released it breaks up into tiny beads that can be inhaled or ingested, causing shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and even death. It is especially harmful to the brains and nervous systems of children.

In addition to being stored as a raw element, mercury is often found in common science lab equipment such as thermometers, barometers and electronic light switches.

But mercury isn't the only toxic chemical in schools. Others include Picric acid and ethyl ether -- potent explosives -- and bromine and chlorine -- past chemical warfare agents. Many of these chemicals are left over from the 1950s when the drive to compete with the Soviet space program pushed the government to pour money into science development in schools.

"We got bottles with labels from the 1920s, '30s, '40s, '50s," science teacher Sam Wine told MSNBC. "We didn't know what to do with them. You can't throw them away because of the environmental hazard. So they're stacked up!"

Expensive cleanup

Removing mercury and other toxic chemicals from schools is expensive. EPA programs for mercury cleanup amount to only \$250,000 -- enough money for about 20 to 30 schools.

But the cost of spills is even greater. The Cardoza High School spill has cost \$57,000 as of March 5 and a spill in Green Bay, Wis. in 1999 was settled at \$175,000. Costs can include cleaning up school buildings, buses, student homes as well as replacing contaminated clothing and belongings.

“Mercury doesn’t clean up easily; it will break up into smaller particles and will just keep moving ahead of you while you’re trying to clean it,” Tom Dalton, the director of buildings and grounds at the Mosinee School District in Wisconsin, told the Wausau Daily Herald.

Declining use through education

Despite recent high-profile spills, the use of mercury in classrooms is actually declining, according to Ken Roy, a Connecticut science teacher and co-chairman of the National Science Teachers Association’s safety advisory board.

"The awareness is so high now that I would say a good part of it (mercury) is gone from schools," Roy told CNN. "The problem comes when a teacher retires, and someone new comes in and finds a horde of it in a cabinet in a chemical storeroom."

Such awareness was not always the case and many adults recall playing with mercury as children.

“When I was a child, I played with blobs of mercury, rubbed it into quarters and dimes and knocked it around table tops,” Jerry Compton, Oakland University’s chemistry lab manager, told the Detroit Free Press. “The toxicity of it hasn’t changed, just the response to it.”

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