

Get the Lead Out

Lead Contamination in Montana Public Schools



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The drama that unfolded in Flint, Mich., in 2014-15 provided a tragic reminder of the dangers of lead exposure. We learned the drinking water of an entire city had been contaminated with lead. More than 8,000 children under the age of 6 drank lead-contaminated water.

Now, we know this toxic threat extends well beyond Flint to communities across the country. Test results show that lead is even contaminating drinking water in schools and pre-schools — flowing from thousands of fountains and faucets where our kids drink water every day.

Lead is highly toxic, especially for children.

A potent neurotoxin, lead affects how our children learn, grow and behave. According to the EPA, "In children, low levels of [lead] exposure have been linked to damage to the central and peripheral nervous system, learning disabilities, shorter stature, impaired hearing, and impaired formation and function of blood cells."¹

Lead is so toxic that experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommend a health standard of 1 part per billion for water in schools.²

It's a pervasive threat to our children's health.

Even the limited available data shows drinking water laced with lead at schools and early childhood programs across the country, in big cities but also in suburban and rural communities.

Sometimes, the levels of lead are exceedingly high. For example, one drinking water fountain at a Montessori school in Cleveland had 1,560 parts per billion.³ Another school in the Chicago suburbs had lead-water concentrations at 212 times the federal standard.⁴

In all likelihood, these confirmed cases of lead in schools' water are just the tip of the iceberg. Due to the inherent variability in lead corrosion and particles, even properly done tests can sometimes fail to detect the full extent of contamination. Moreover, most

¹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Basic Information about Lead in Drinking Water," *EPA.gov*, updated March 2018, accessible at <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/basic-information-about-lead-drinking-water>

² American Academy of Pediatrics, *Prevention of Childhood Toxicity*, July 2016, page 4, available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2016/06/16/peds.2016-1493.full.pdf>

³ Brian Zeltner, "[Cleveland schools find dangerous lead levels in water from 60 buildings; will replace 580 outlets.](#)" *Cleveland.com*, Nov. 18, 2016.

⁴ Jake Griffin, "[Why Schools Won't Test for Lead.](#)" *Daily Herald*. Dec. 6, 2016.

schools have at least some lead in their pipes, plumbing or fixtures. And where there is lead, there is risk of contamination.

Montana's urban schools have a lead problem.

While most Montana schools are not required to test for lead in drinking water, some school systems voluntarily test. This year, we submitted records requests for the most recent test results from districts in Montana's four largest cities: Billings Schools, Missoula County Schools, Great Falls Schools, and Bozeman Schools.

The results were shocking: *three quarters* (75.1%) of the districts' tests found some level of lead in the water.⁵

Figure 1. Voluntary test results for districts in Montana's four largest cities (2016-18).

System Name	Number of tests	Tests at or above 1 ppb
Billings Schools	30	70.0%
Missoula County Schools	140	77.9%
Great Falls Schools	32	71.9%
Bozeman Schools	19	68.4%
Total	221	75.1%

Our rural schools might be even worse.

A total of 104 schools throughout the state serve as their own utility and are required to conduct regular mandatory lead testing. These schools generally draw their drinking water from wells, and they tend to be in the more rural districts across the state.

In the past ten years, these school-utilities found lead in 78% of the 423 samples they tested.⁶ Some of the results were especially troubling: one sample from Jim Darcy School in Lewis and Clark County tested at 244 ppb – *sixteen times the mandatory EPA cut-off for water utilities.*

⁵ Data collected from facility department records provided in response to a request on October 31, 2017.

⁶ Data retrieved from the Montana Dept. of Environmental Quality [Drinking Water Watch](#) database, accessed on January 3, 2018.

It's time to get the lead out of Montana's schools.

The science is clear: there is no safe level of lead exposure for our children. We need policies strong enough to get the lead out of Montana's schools, including:

- Adopting a 1 ppb standard for lead in school drinking water, immediately removing from service any faucet or fountain where this level is exceeded;
- Requiring testing at all water outlets used for drinking and cooking at schools;
- Immediately installing filters certified to remove lead at all faucets and fountains in Montana schools;
- Pro-actively removing lead-bearing parts from schools' water delivery systems to ensure lead-free water; and
- Disclosing all available information about test results and remediation onsite and online.



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