

Gilchrist School health issues

In an exclusive interview with the Cheyenne Herald, a former teacher at Gilchrist Elementary School told us that she dealt with several years of health problems before finally quitting. She and her physician believe the problems were caused by the conditions within Gilchrist Elementary School.

She began work at Gilchrist as soon as it was completed. Prior to her return to teaching in Cheyenne, she had taught for 17 years in South Dakota and northeastern Wyoming.

Within three or four years at Gilchrist, her health started to decline and she was diagnosed with allergies and prescribed medication to deal with the problem. Her symptoms were extreme headaches and sinus congestion that would lessen during summer vacations and when she wasn't in the school building.

She told the Herald that during her time of employment at Gilchrist, other teachers had similar problems and some also left or made it to the top of LCSD1's transfer list and now work elsewhere.

Until the recent revelation that walls between the classroom and outer block wall were contaminated with stachybotrus mold, there were guesses about that being the cause of the health problems, but no confirmation. A Cheyenne allergist had treated her but could never pinpoint the source of the problem.

Her reason for speaking out now, albeit anonymously by name, is that even though she stepped aside for health reasons a few years ago, she still has friends who work and teach there and she is concerned for the children about exposure to the dangerous mold.

Studies have determined that the level of exposure probably exacerbates the severity of the problem - in terms of aspirating mold. Children have shorter days and are outside the classroom three times a school day or more. They have recesses morning and afternoon and they have time after lunch to breathe fresh air and run around, diminishing any effect mold may otherwise have on their health.

However, children with allergies or asthma could experience health difficulties more readily than those without.

The Herald has related the story of the Torrington community college quickly evacuating and planning to demolish a dormitory building because of the presence of mold.

For some reason, Laramie County School District No. 1 is moving slower.

The former teacher told about cabinets being taken from walls and the backsides (against the wall) were covered with mold.

For years, complaints have been lodged about the health issues and odor in certain rooms at Gilchrist. In one instance, they moved a teacher to a more distant room from the problem area. Other rooms on the outside of the building were used for art and music - not everyday classes for the students.

Teachers whose classrooms were against the outside walls exposed to leakage could seek a transfer to a different school but there were so many requests for transfers (not all for health reasons) that it was hard to work to the top of that list.

According to what this former teacher told the Herald, on more than one occasion, a teacher at Gilchrist was told by a doctor, "quit or die." At least two did quit.

As written in an earlier story, there are two other city schools built similarly to Gilchrist - at about the same time - that raise a concern of similar mold.

Because the school district has been made aware of the specific instance of a deadly mold (stachybotrus) at one of the schools in the district, they face the potential that every administrator, teacher, staff person, or student who develops or aggravates breathing problems and has attended or worked in one of the district schools, will bring a lawsuit to claim negligence on the part of the district. Such lawsuits, of course, will be settled with public money if the district loses.

At some point, the potential is there to claim a reckless indifference on the part of school board members and district administrators. That becomes a different matter.

With the Wyoming Supreme Court ruling that the State is responsible for new school construction, it could also be determined

that the State is also responsible for existing school building safety.

Perhaps the focus of those who now or in the future take legal action against the school district for claimed health problems related to mold which has been or may be found in the walls of the school buildings should be shifted to the State level.

It makes sense that if the Supreme Court found them responsible for new buildings, they would find them responsible for the old ones.

The former teacher told the Herald that the school district took other measures to try to identify the source of the health concerns. They replaced carpets. They tried to improve the air ventilation and cleaning. But when teachers tried to bring in their own air ionizers, that was not allowed.

This particular teacher left that profession short of a normal retirement and went into business for herself. Similar to a former smoker, she can pinpoint the day she stopped taking the medication she had been prescribed for the diagnosis of allergic reactions in the school. "Seven months," she proudly said.

Could it be a mere coincidence - all of these findings? Could it be that mold is not and has not been the cause of the health problems at Gilchrist? Could it be that the two maintenance men who were sent in there unprotected mysteriously came down with the same illnesses at the same time even though they weren't friends and had no common links which should lead to the same illness or disease? Could it be that children haven't had the same problems (at least for the most part) as teachers even though in the same room because they didn't have the same level of exposure - or is it because the adults were faking the problems for some reason? What was in it for them?

Gilchrist is partially bermed. Part of the exterior wall is underground. If ever a potential for water standing, seepage or leaking existed, it would be under these conditions. The maintenance man said the walls are not sealed properly. Why hasn't that berm been removed and those outside walls been exposed to sunlight to reduce the possibility of water settling there and finding a way through the block wall? How many other schools in this district or in LCSD2 are similarly constructed?


As a precaution, after finding the mold in one wall at Gilchrist, why haven't all of the similarly situated interior walls been torn out? If nothing more than a precaution if mold is present, it seems worth doing.

Will denial of an existing problem lead to even greater liability to the school district, which transfers to the taxpayers?

This source told the Herald that there was a noticeable odor in those certain rooms. During the day, after doors were open, it would dissipate or become less apparent. Because of the walls being underground, there were no windows to be opened to air out the room or reduce the offensive odor. Only when former President Bush visited the area and Gilchrist was used as a communications center and cables had to be brought in from outside, were the windows fully opened. Normally, they were kept closed. Or open a crack.

One reason for the continued coverage of what is apparently a contested situation at Gilchrist School is to create a record if there are those being needlessly exposed to more problems. The cat is out of the bag. The two maintenance men have exposed the mold contamination. If the school district can successfully defend inaction in that instance, these health issues may be unprovable as well.

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