

Northwest Indiana schools praise 'proactive' state lead testing program



Hanover Central Building and Grounds Director, Steve Goff, stands in the Hanover Central High School kitchen where many of the school's appliances were tested for lead. (Suzanne Tennant / Post-Tribune)

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Post-Tribune

APRIL 28, 2018, 6:55 PM

A state program offering free lead testing has allowed several Northwest Indiana schools to more widely identify and replace aging infrastructure.

Since February 2017, more than 125 eligible public and charter schools in Lake and Porter counties have signed up for the Indiana Finance Authority program that provided a free round of lead testing statewide.

State testers followed U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guidelines, testing in areas where water could be used for consumption: drinking fountains, ice machines, classroom sinks, cafeteria and food preparation sinks, teacher's lounge sinks, and other applicable fixtures.

Partial state data released in April show 24 of 41 Northwest Indiana schools had one or more fixtures or other areas flagged for testing above 15 parts per billion (ppb) -- The EPA's formal action level for lead.

School officials have praised the program, saying state testers were able to cast a wider net and lab results often identified isolated fixtures causing elevated lead levels in rarely used spaces they were quickly able to replace.

At Hanover Central, Maintenance Director Steve Goff said they received test results in February. Since then, he has replaced a handful of drinking fountain bubblers at Jane Ball Elementary and other fixtures at Hanover Central Middle and High Schools.

“You are always worrying about the safety and well-being of the kids,” he said. With the state’s program, “How more proactive can you get?”

At Merrillville, workers replaced a couple of fixtures each at Pierce Middle School and Merrillville High School, Director of Maintenance Services Joe Bardeson said.

“We strived to take this and make the changes immediately and that’s what we did,” Bardeson said. “Every building was completed within a week.”

At Lake Central, about 21 of nearly 600 tested fixtures across the district in six schools were eventually replaced, Facilities Director Bill Ledyard said in a newsletter to parents.

Fixtures flagged were “rarely used,” he wrote.

Valparaiso Community Schools did not participate, because administrators had previously ordered lead testing.

Schools/districts participating include: 21st Century Charter School, Crown Point, Duneland, East Porter, Gary Community School Corp., Gary Middle College, Griffith, Hanover Central, Lake Central, Lake Ridge, Lake Station, MSD Boone Township, Merrillville, Portage Township, River Forest, School City of East Chicago, Hobart, Whiting, Munster, Tri-Creek, and Union Township.

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