

Students suffer from poor air quality

AIR QUALITY, From 1A

on the issue is planned next fall for school administrators.

The problem occurs most commonly in older school buildings as moisture seeps in through cracking foundations or drips through leaky roofs, allowing mold and fungus to grow on floors, walls or ceilings.

The result often is a foul odor that can trigger allergy-like symptoms or more serious problems for people with asthma, emphysema or other respiratory ailments.

About 15 million people nationwide have been diagnosed with asthma — one-third of them children. The number of cases has jumped 50% in the past 20 years, although some studies suggest new cases among children are increasing more quickly.

Coping with bad air

In the Palmyra-Eagle School District, officials are struggling to find the source of an air problem plaguing several classrooms in the 50-year-old Palmyra Elementary School. Some teachers have complained of itchy eyes and sneezing.

ONLINE

For statewide data on chronic lung diseases county by county, look for the link at www.jsonline.com.

"It smells like a sweaty locker room," says Denise Hamm, a mother of three children who attend the school.

Voters in the Palmyra-Eagle district recently approved a \$280,000 referendum to fund roof repairs and ventilation improvements at the school.

"We're trying, trying, trying to resolve it," said district business manager Erin Gauthier.

In Mequon, tests at Homestead High School a few years ago traced poor air quality to mold found growing in utility tunnels underneath the 40-year-old school. Exhaust fans and pumps were installed in the tunnels to eliminate the mold, and teacher complaints about allergy symptoms have subsided.

Getting the word out

Leaders of the American Lung Association of Wisconsin fear, however, that many educators are unaware of the seriousness of air quality problems — or are reluctant to deal with the potential costs.

Next school year, the Brookfield-based organization plans to visit up to 50 state school districts to demonstrate that better air quality can be as simple as removing posters that cover classroom air vents.

Other tips include ensuring school buses are not blowing exhaust fumes through open windows, affixing ribbons to air exchanges to make sure they work properly, and removing carpeting

where dust and mold can collect.

Known as "Tools for Schools," the program is based on guidelines developed in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Otte said he suspects many teachers and parents never consider that a musty classroom can be a sign of more serious trouble.

"Until they see it, they don't really think about it," he said.

Some teachers say they just open windows when a moldy smell becomes a problem.

But teacher Luanne Peterson blames poor air quality at South Milwaukee Middle School for her health problems.

When she joined the South Milwaukee faculty in 1990 as a music teacher, Peterson found that her classroom was a damp, moldy space in the basement. After a few years, she developed allergies — and then asthma.

Nonetheless, she credits administrators with trying to correct the problem.

"Things happen in life," she said. "This is something that's happened, and I'll deal with it for the rest of my life."

South Milwaukee school administrators in 1998 went to voters with a \$25 million referendum proposal to build a new middle school. The measure was rejected by more than a 2-to-1 margin.

Superintendent David Ewald said officials have since taken what steps they could afford to improve ventilation and keep moisture out.

Ewald said he could not address Alex Franson's illness specifically because of student confidentiality rights.

The superintendent noted, however, that "mold is everywhere."

But health officials say that for

MORE INFORMATION

For information about "Tools for Schools," call the American Lung Association of Wisconsin at (262) 782-7833.

children, exposure to poor air quality at school can last six hours a day or longer.

Jordan Fink, another physician at Children's Hospital, said he has seen at least a dozen patients whose respiratory problems in recent years could be traced to school.

On a few occasions, Fink urged parents to take their children out of schools.

"The parents become very frustrated, but the principal can't do anything because he doesn't have the money," he said.

For Alex Franson, the dilemma has pulled him away from friends and a school that he enjoyed.

Now in seventh grade, the 13-year-old continues to be tutored at home. He hopes to return to a regular school, but not if it means paying the price he paid to attend South Milwaukee Middle School.

"I just felt totally sick, almost all the time," he said.

It was a family vacation in Florida that first persuaded Alex's parents to consider the school itself was a possible cause for his illness.

The same kid who slept in the living room after school because he could not climb the stairs to his bedroom enjoyed frolicking on the Florida beach and collecting seashells.

"It was obvious then to me," Denise Franson said. "I went to the school and told them, 'Your building made my kid sick.'"