

EVERY BREATH THEY TAKE

Some children, teachers
struggling to breathe
in aging, musty schools



By **SCOTT WILLIAMS**
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For Alex Franson, the end of another school day meant a chance to heal.

Suffering from asthma, the South Milwaukee sixth-grader routinely arrived home struggling for every breath. His condition would improve at home, only to deteriorate when he returned to school.

"It was so extreme," said his mother, Denise Franson. "It was very scary."

Initially baffled, doctors studied the situation for months before concluding: Alex was sick because his school was sick.

Built nearly 90 years ago, South Milwaukee Middle School is a crowded facility with poor ventilation and mold tainting the air. At a doctor's urging, Alex's parents pulled him out of school.

"There was definitely a connection," said Michael Levy, a physician at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. "It was pretty clear to me."

Indoor air quality is a growing issue in the nation's aging schools, with students increasingly warehoused in dank facilities at a time when many school districts cannot afford renovations, much less new buildings.

Hundreds of high school students in the Chicago suburb of St. Charles recently were displaced when their school was closed because of air quality concerns.

Addressing the problem

In Wisconsin, a new effort is being launched to confront the issue in classrooms, as health advocates warn that students and teachers could be risking illness with every breath they take.

"Is it going to kill you? No. Is it going to slow you down and cause other problems? Yes," said Jeremy Otte, program coordinator for the American Lung Association of Wisconsin.

With a \$10,000 state grant, the association plans to help schools identify and resolve air quality problems. A conference

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ELIZABETH FLORES / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Thirteen-year-old Alex Franson is home-schooled by Darlene Jaskoviak, a retired South Milwaukee schoolteacher, on Friday in South Milwaukee. Franson's parents removed him from South Milwaukee Middle School because doctors said the moldy building was making him sick.

Please see **AIR QUALITY, 6A**