

Inform parents about chemical use, group says

Schoolchildren may be exposed to poisons

By COLIN FREEZE

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With a report from Canadian Press

Fearing that schools have been infiltrated by toxic chemicals, an environmental group is recommending a new bill of rights for students.

Vancouver's Labour Environmental Alliance Society wants schools to be required to tell students and parents what chemicals are used for cleaning and upkeep.

The group says children are particularly vulnerable to toxic chemicals -- including some linked to cancer, asthma, attention-deficit disorder and even autism -- but often parents and teachers know nothing of the threat the materials pose.

So, LEAS is trying to get officials to sign a bill of rights that would ensure parents are informed of the types of chemicals used, should they request the information. "The public response has been very good," said LEAS researcher Sean Griffin. So far, his group has the support of five area trustees, and the Vancouver board is endorsing the proposal in principle, he says.

For years, LEAS has been working with unions to ensure that school janitors are exposed to fewer toxic solvents. Because of this, the group has already had some success in convincing boards in Burnaby, Langley and Vancouver to forgo certain harmful chemicals in favour of safer ones.

But unlike workers, students and parents aren't entitled to know what chemicals are used in schools. "It's certainly not done as a matter of routine," Mr. Griffin said.

In fact, many parents who have been asking such questions are surprised by what they find out.

One East Vancouver mother recently enlisted a principal to help her find out what kind of paint was being used. She was stunned to find out that the paint, which was being applied during class hours, generated airborne solvents linked to everything from headaches to cancer.

"It seems like a no-brainer that stuff like that shouldn't be put on walls while children are in class," Barbara Docherty told the Georgia Straight weekly newspaper in an interview last week. "And this painting was supposed to go on for six weeks."

The paint was replaced. But similar cases have also prompted alarm.

Claudia Ferris, a spokeswoman for the Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council, said a carpet-cleaning agent thought to contain carcinogens was recently replaced. "Of course, the kids sit on the rugs and put their hands in their mouths," Ms. Ferris said.

"The parents are completely behind this kind of initiative because, it turns out, workers, the unions, have the right to find out what they're exposed to, but our kids don't and we don't and that seems wrong when you look at that buildup of toxic chemicals."

Warren Bell, past president of the Toronto-based Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, said minimizing children's exposure to toxic chemicals is important because their organs are still developing. "What we need to do is make sure that Canadian citizens are fully aware of the dimension of the problem," Dr. Bell said.

Canada is way behind other countries when it comes to environmental laws, he said.

"We're down at the bottom of the 28 [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries for environmental protection, and yet we often present ourselves to the world as a very environmentally conscious nation."