

Medical guidance sought after contamination closes school

October 20 2022, by Jim Salter



"Virtual school is not the answer," said mother Cheryl Lane, right, who leaves a Hazelwood School Board meeting with her two sons, Aaron, 9, left, and Andrew, 7, Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2022, at the Hazelwood School District Learning Center in Florissant, Mo. The board announced elementary students will switch to virtual learning after radioactive waste was found at Jana Elementary School. "My kids have been virtual since the start of the school year and they are not learning," said Lane. Credit: Laurie Skrivan/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP

Some parents of children at Jana Elementary School in suburban St. Louis say they'll seek medical testing and guidance from doctors about what to do next, after a privately-funded environmental study found radioactive contamination inside the school and on the playground.

The Hazelwood Board of Education on Tuesday announced [plans to close the grade school](#) in Florissant, Missouri, indefinitely and clean it. The roughly 400 students—80% of whom are Black—will do virtual learning for now, then be sent to some of the district's 19 other [elementary schools](#) starting Nov. 28.

It's unclear how long the cleanup process will take, what it will involve or who will pay for it. A district spokeswoman declined comment beyond a written statement that broadly outlined the plan to close the school and relocate children.

Coldwater Creek runs directly behind Jana Elementary, which has educated thousands of children since it opened 50 years ago. The creek was contaminated in the 1940s and 1950s when waste from atomic bomb material manufactured in St. Louis got into the waterway near Lambert Airport, where the waste was stored. The creek runs 19 miles (30 kilometers) before spilling into the Missouri River.

The result was an environmental nightmare. For decades, children who lived near the creek hunted for crawdads and splashed in the water on hot summer days, unaware of the poison they were playing in.



"We don't blame you all, but we want to hear what's going on because these are our babies," said Patrice Strickland, who returns to her seat after speaking out during the public portion of a Hazelwood School Board meeting addressing a report that elevated levels of radioactive waste found at Jana Elementary School, Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2022, at the Hazelwood School District Learning Center in Florissant, Mo. Strickland has two children who have been attending school virtually since August. Credit: Laurie Skrivan/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP

A 2019 federal report determined that those exposed to Coldwater Creek from the 1960s to the 1990s may have an increased risk of bone cancer, lung cancer and leukemia. Environmentalists and [area residents](#) have cited several instances of extremely rare cancers that have sickened and killed people.

The Environmental Protection Agency established a Superfund site in 1989, and the government is spending millions to clean up the mess, though the project isn't expected to end until 2038.

Amidst that backdrop, it's no wonder that Jana Elementary parents were alarmed by the Oct. 10 report from Boston Chemical Data Corp., funded by two law firms suing to seek compensation for illnesses and deaths. It found levels of radioactive isotope lead-210 that were 22 times the expected level on the kindergarten playground. It also found high levels of polonium, radium and other material inside the school.

Kimberly Anderson told the board during a packed meeting on Tuesday that she is raising three grandchildren who attend Jana Elementary. She worried about the health damage that might already have occurred.



Jana Elementary School, left, which is in the Hazelwood School District, is seen on Monday, Oct. 17, 2022 in Florissant, Mo. Elevated levels of radioactive waste were found at the school, according to a recent report, and the parent-teacher association wants an open public meeting to discuss it. Coldwater Creek, right, which is prone to flooding, was contaminated by waste from nuclear bombs manufactured during World War II. Photo by David Carson, dcarson@post-dispatch.com/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP)/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP)

Anderson said the district should provide a medical expert who can offer "insight as to what I need to be looking for and what I need to have tested for my children."

To start with, Anderson said she plans to have the blood of her grandchildren tested.

Ashley Bernaugh is president of the PTA, lives nearby and has a son who attends. She called the findings of the study "terrifying."

She said "lab testing would be prudent especially because of the levels of radioactivity and lead found."

The Army Corps of Engineers earlier found contamination in the woods nearby. But since none was found in the area between the woods and the school, the agency didn't test the building or the grounds.

Phillip Moser, program manager of the Corps' Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program in St. Louis, expressed concerns about the Boston Chemical report, calling it "incomplete and not consistent with the approved processes required to do an evaluation at one of our sites."



This aerial photo shows Jana Elementary School, in the Hazelwood School District, Monday, Oct. 17, 2022 in Florissant, Mo. Elevated levels of radioactive waste were found at the school, according to a recent report, and the parent-teacher association wants an open public meeting to discuss it. Nearby Coldwater Creek, hidden by a line of trees next to the field to the right, which is prone to flooding, was contaminated by waste from nuclear bombs manufactured during World War II. Credit: David Carson/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP



A school bus arrives at Jana Elementary School on Monday, Oct. 17, 2022 in Florissant, Mo. Radioactive samples were found at the Hazelwood School District school, according to a recently released report. Nearby Coldwater Creek, which flooded in August, was contaminated by waste from nuclear bombs manufactured during World War II. Credit: Christian Gooden/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP

Still, it was enough to prompt local, state and federal lawmakers to call for immediate action.

U.S Rep. Cori Bush, a St. Louis Democrat, said the federal government "is responsible for this waste" and needs to clean it up.

U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley, a Republican, wrote to President Joe Biden on

Wednesday, asking that he declare a federal emergency to expedite remediation. If cleanup is not feasible, Hawley said the government should pay for a new building.

"The parents, children and residents of this area have waited years for the federal government to complete its cleanup," Hawley wrote. "Now their [school](#) is contaminated. They deserve immediate relief."

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