

Parents worry about mold at St. Lucie schools

By Margot Susca
staff writer
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Jim Moore is the father of twin 5-year-old kindergartners who attend Manatee Elementary in Port St. Lucie. He also works for a private mold cleanup company.

In his five years as a parent and in the air-quality business, Moore never thought the two would converge.

But the twins are sick — they are tired and disoriented with red blotchy skin — and Moore thinks he knows why.

"We went to the pediatrician and the pediatrician asked what school our kids attend," Moore said. "I told him and he said that was a red flag, that he's seen over 100 students from that school."

Armed with infrared detectors and spore counters from work, he's checked the family's new home in Port St. Lucie. His testing shows nothing harmful at home.

The same testing he says cleared his home and the same testing he uses everyday at work won't be used by the school district.

Since no federal health or environmental agency outlines just what is a harmful mold level, Schools Superintendent Michael Lannon and facilities staff are sticking by a decision not to test for different kinds of mold.

"We have hired our industrial hygienist and they have advised us on the protocols for recovery and we're relying on their protocols," Facilities Director Marty Sanders said. "We have also relied upon consultations with the Department of Health and with the Department of Education."

Moore and other parents planning to attend a Wednesday meeting are hoping for answers from school staff and county health officials about safety without such tests.

Complaints of mold and air-quality issues have dropped off since mid- November, when Lannon requested principals act as information gatherers to notify Sanders of potential air-quality or health problems.

At Lakewood Park Elementary School in Fort Pierce, Principal Debbie Caudill, using that protocol, wrote to Sanders Dec. 1.

"I thought you should know that I became aware of the fact that we've had an increase in the number of nosebleeds: 2 in August, 12 in Oct., and 9 in Nov.," Caudill wrote. "This I believe is significant."

Nosebleeds can be a symptom of mold exposure, health experts say.

According to materials provided by Sanders' office, Caudill's is one of 14 complaints filed between Nov. 23 and Dec. 2. Some complaints outline more than one problem, for example, highlighting multiple classrooms with issues.

One of three from Fort Pierce Central High School, considered the worst hit by hurricanes Frances and Jeanne in September, comes from a teacher who says many students are complaining of illnesses.

Despite illness reports from teachers, transportation workers and children, Lannon says it's

not clear school is the cause.

"We have these boys and girls for six and a half to seven hours a day," Lannon said. "For 17 or 18 hours a day these children are someplace else that could be the cause, and we are in flu season now."

Both Lannon and Sanders said the district will continue to pursue an aggressive sanitizing and rebuilding campaign in a district that suffered \$40 million in hurricane damages and saw school closed for more than a month.

Because neither the Environmental Protection Agency nor the Centers for Disease Control provide a standard for air-quality testing, the administrators say if mold is seen or smelled it will be handled.

Parents like Moore, Stephen Reheiser and Jennifer Graves are questioning school safety after multiple doctor visits and new prescriptions for their otherwise healthy children.

Reheiser's daughter, Michelle Gartrell, 18, rarely missed school at Central before the hurricanes. Last week, her physician diagnosed chronic bronchitis and Reheiser complained to school staff.

Despite the nonexistent governmental standards, concerned parents, many who have become mold researchers in their spare time, point to industry guidelines used by the private sector to determine worker safety.

Although scientists may not agree about what is harmful, the EPA recommends separating students and staff from construction and renovation areas.

With thousands of square feet of tile still left to put down, walls still marked as wet and ceiling tiles taken out, some schools are like construction sites.

Ongoing work, ripping out wet walls at Manatee, led Moore to keep his twins home Friday. Graves, too, kept her daughter home.

She has brought verbal concerns to Manatee's principal; records don't show her complaints given about her 5-year-old daughter's symptoms, like headaches and high fevers.

"I assumed that because it's the school district that I had nothing to worry about sending her back," Graves said. "Their concern is our children. I never thought twice.

"But I have to start questioning her surroundings because at home nothing has changed. You can disregard the first couple of illnesses, but there has to be a line drawn somewhere."

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Airing concerns

WHO: Members of the county health department and St. Lucie County School District will attend. The public is invited.

WHAT: The St. Lucie Air-Quality Task Force, a grass-roots group, plans to meet.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Wednesday

WHERE: Port St. Lucie Community Center at 2195 SE Airoso Blvd.