

The "Sleeping Giant" and other schools

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by K. Robinson

In some circles, Halifax West High School is known as "the Sleeping Giant". The significance of its Indoor Environment Quality and building structure problems has not yet become public. A number of teachers and students report being very sick in the school. The problems are serious enough that officials are examining whether the school can be repaired or needs to be replaced. Community members are organizing, and the Department of Education has made a commitment to assess this school and other potential sleeping giants.

More and more people are recognizing that clean air and a healthy environment are as important to learning as are a good curriculum and good teaching. There have been many improvements in Nova Scotia schools, but the struggle to provide safe, healthy places for school children is a daily one. Many schools still have significant problems. Some school boards are more proactive than others, and some staff and principals have more knowledge and commitment than others. The Nova Scotia Department of Education has been taking strong action to try to improve the situation. CASLE has been actively involved in helping this process.

Progress so far:

* In the fall of 1998, when roof repair tar pots arrived at schools, one principal evacuated the school, sending the children home. In another school, students and staff were removed far upwind while the principal sent the workers away. This is progress.

* Carpets are being routinely removed from schools across the province.

* A less toxic paint is in use across the province. In some boards there is the mistaken belief that this paint is safe to use while children are present. The Annapolis Valley Board has a form signed by three officials to ensure proper protection of students and staff from exposure to fumes.

* In Halifax, chlorine bleach is to be used with permission from the operations department, and only with strict controls for exposure, and only for dealing with special mould problems. (Some schools are apparently still routinely using chlorine cleaners. If yours is one, speak to your Principal and JOHSC.)

* Citrus (that lemony smell) cleaners are not to be used in some boards' jurisdictions. There are several reasons for this, one being that limonene, or d'limonene, the primary citrus ingredient, has been found by researchers to form formaldehyde when combined with ozone. Ozone is a byproduct of many motors and is naturally present in the air.

* Mop Oil is no longer supposed to be used as the attractant for school mops in the Halifax Region. In its place are mop heads with special dirt-attracting qualities that are less toxic.

* Bathroom deodorizers are not supposed to be used in some school regions.

* Floor waxing is happening after hours in many schools. Floor stripping is being done on weekends or vacations.

* Halifax Region and the Chignecto Board have new policies on Life Threatening Allergies and Anaphylaxis ... others may as well.

* A directive was circulated that pesticides are not to be used in Halifax Region Schools. It is not yet clear what alternatives are being used or planned, as pests are still a problem.

* Schools are having photocopier rooms and laminators vented, on request in some boards, proactively in others. (There is a new kind of laminator available that does not use heat in the process, so it offgasses much less.)

* About 80% of Halifax Region schools have voluntary scent-free, fragrance-free programs. A board policy was written over a year ago, but has not yet been adopted. There has been opposition from the chemical/perfume industry and others who do not understand that this is a health issue.

* Gymnasium floors are still occasionally being refinished without adequate isolation or offgassing time before children use the area. There has been improvement in this, but some serious incidents did occur this past year. One of these may result in a court case, as a child was seriously affected.

* In the Halifax Region, the new Superintendent has shown an interest in improving Indoor Environment Quality and in upgrading schools that are in poor condition. Also, PTA presidents in one area of Halifax recently noted the condition of school buildings as their #1 education concern.

* CASLE board members currently serve on HRSB Systems Review committees pertaining to environmental health and safety issues, and on the IAQ Action Team for Halifax West High School.

Some steps backward:

* Furnace fume leaks or oil spills often require prompt evacuation of the school. Principals need to be aware that exposing children or staff to such fumes can worsen existing health problems or create onset of illness or sensitivities.

* In Halifax Regional Schools new curtains will be supplied where needed, but CASLE is concerned that the replacement curtains chosen are fire-retardant polyester curtains

that were not evaluated for chemical off-gassing. Are new curtains coming to your school? There are less toxic curtains, less toxic fire retardants and less toxic cleaning processes commercially available.

Planning For Healthier Schools:

Much progress has come as the result of several government departments and school boards being willing to learn more about and share information about Indoor Environment Quality in schools.

* The summer of 1997 saw the first Provincial Indoor Air Quality Conference on Schools, sponsored by the Department of Education. CASLE made the opening address to "set the tone" for the two days.

* Health Inspectors and Regional Officers of Health are working closely with the regional school boards.

* The Departments of Education, Health and Environment have begun an interdepartmental library on children and environmental health & safety.

* CASLE executive wrote a report on the new Horton School (near Wolfville) from an environmental health viewpoint. The report was widely circulated through the province by the Department of Education.

* CASLE is working with the Departments of Education and Public Works to help ensure that the province's many new schools are environmentally healthy. In 1998, CASLE made several presentations, at the request of the Department of Education, to the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, the maintenance managers for the seven provincial school boards, Labour and Health Inspectors and the construction consortiums that will be building our new schools. CASLE's report on ventilation systems was instrumental in the Department's decision to require full ventilation systems rather than less effective rooftop package units. The Department of Education has also made a commitment that new schools will have no

carpeting, no recirculated air, use less toxic materials whenever possible and will be evaluated for good air quality before the schools are put into use. The Department has indicated a plan to provide at least one ECOclassroom in each district to serve students and staff affected by environmental sensitivities. CASLE helped in the planning for the Fall River ECOclassroom - the first in the province.

* CASLE has been working with the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre on a National project on school Indoor Air Quality and guideline development. CASLE is also a key contributor to a three year project being done by Pollution Probe in Ottawa. As well as providing information to parents, school staffs, boards and government departments over the past year, CASLE provided information for several media pieces, including CBC TV's Midday and Marketplace, The National, CBC Radio News and special programs, The Globe & Mail, Wall Street Journal and local media.

Occupational Health and Parents:

There has been confusion in some districts over whether parents may serve on school Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees (JOHSC). CASLE received a letter from the Department of Labour which clears up the question. Essentially, each on-site committee has control over shaping itself to best fit the particular worksite. If the committee members feel that non-employee, non-employer members would benefit their committee, there is nothing to prevent parents or others from being asked to serve as long as both employer and employee sides agree. These members would technically occupy employer seats, and the 50% employee rule must be adhered to. There are no restrictions on voting rights imposed by the Department. Although the primary purpose of the JOHSC is to protect worker health and safety, Section 13 of the Health and Safety Act provides reasonable protection for all those on or near the worksite. Labour Department officials agree that parents on JOHSCs tend

to make the committees very effective. Although it is a staff committee, much that protects the staff also protects children.

The author is President of CASLE and also serves on the NSAEHA Board as Chair of the Treatment Committee.

For memberships, information or donations, CASLE can be reached at CASLE, 287 Lacewood Drive, Unit 103, Suite 178, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 3Y7 or at www.casle.ca

Toxic Cleaners ALERT, Fall 1999:

The Halifax Regional School Board recently decided to use an all-purpose cleaner containing an Endocrine Disruptor (APEO), an unknown dye, and an unknown Nitrogen-bearing material.

This decision has parents with concerns about the Environment and health in schools upset. CASLE members chose to remove themselves from the board's Product Evaluation Committee due to serious flaws in committee procedures and in the selection process, so that CASLE would not be seen as approving of any product chosen from such a process.

This pilot project was to choose a less-toxic, economic and efficient all-purpose cleaner for use in the entire Halifax Region.

CASLE is very concerned because there were at least three other effective, less toxic and cost-effective products in the competition.

Several major international cleaner manufacturers have voluntarily removed APEOs - chemicals which mimic, replace or disrupt communication between hormones of humans and other living things - from their products, and at least two other school boards in Nova Scotia already ban such materials.

It is estimated that over a three year period this decision could result in 3.5 tons of pure APEO entering the waters of the Halifax Region.

CASLE has been assured that the newly hired Director of Operations will be putting a fair and well run tender process in place for

the future. That much is good, but at time of writing, CASLE is continuing to try to have the all-purpose cleaner decision changed.

Less toxic alternatives are available at principals' special request.