

## **Citizens for A Safe Learning Environment**

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### **Halifax West High School**

#### **Community Group's Report to the Halifax West Environment Action Team: April 7, 2000**

#### **Re: Walk through at Halifax West High School**

When I make presentations on school IEQ (Indoor Environment Quality) with CASLE we usually talk about specific technical points like source control, products, healthy practices, and systems adjustments. Today I will take slightly different approach.

I want to make something clear on the onset: In my years of involvement with school incidents there have been times when people/parents/community would use any excuse - even imaginary Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) problems, to force another agenda. This has not been the case with Halifax West, even though in a couple of cases individuals actually said they were hoping I would find something really wrong with their IAQ so that they could use that to get a new school. I am not a pawn. Deceptions like that infuriate me because such drummed up situations can cast doubts on the schools that need real attention, to say nothing of creating doubts about the sick people who legitimately suffer and have lost their health and normal lives to a sick workplace.

It was evident in the walkthrough that someone has been trying very hard to improve the building condition of Halifax West - they had repaired pipes, entire walls and roofs, and more. At the same time, here we have a building with a number of staff who report illness related to the building, and as CASLE president I have received reports over the years from parents of students who have had respiratory problems and more while at that school - and yet are healthy after having left. Did the repairs make a difference? We can only look at what exists now.

The walk through was very revealing. When I first reflected on what I would say today I thought I'd talk about what I saw - some specifics, some general points. And I would refer to the patterns indicated in the graphs Elizabeth prepared for us - how some of them, like the symptoms and frequency and timing of symptoms over months, appear to be classical matches to information I have seen on sick building syndrome.

I'd tell about the physical symptoms I experienced during the walk through, - like popping ears, momentary dizziness, the sensation of "velvet" coating my tongue and throat, the chest pains and all these things that came and went, and I thought "these people who are not like me are going to think I am a nut!" - especially in light of the recent Worker's Compensation Appeals Tribunal decision. In case you have heard about that and have found yourself believing what you heard, I need to tell you that all is not what it seems. Environmental Illness is not psychological, or a stress reaction/form of stress. I will leave for you each copies of the preliminary information on what promises to be a long rebuttal over the next months or years. I only bring it up because I hope that our school board will not jump prematurely into believing that the WCB conclusions were based on accurate, unbiased information. I understand even the lawyers for the appellant are admitting they dropped the ball on that one. Please don't be tempted to make sick teachers pay twice for having gone to work in a building that hurt their health.

I thought about talking about bandaid solutions used when major surgery is needed. And what my mother said about the futility of trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

I wondered why, if so many have suspected possibly significant IAQ problems, why so much time has passed, why more small steps haven't been taken, like reducing clutter, no plants,

washing the curtains and making sure the ventilation system, such as it is, remains on round the clock to remove stale air. And why is there a wet mattress or whatever it is, under the gym stage? On the other hand I was pleased to see no carpeting, & to see, with the exception of a can of spray furniture polish and a citrus cleaner being used on the boards of one classroom, the less toxic cleaning materials are in use.

Some general walkthrough observations:

1. every room and area at HW had its own smell. (In fact I was lost at one point and "found" myself when I recognized the smell of a particular stairwell.)
2. the smell of "clean" is "NOTHING". The smell of "clean" is not "lemon".
3. however, just because something smells, doesn't mean it is unhealthy. But it can be unhealthy and can be an indicator, especially when people report feeling sick in that environment.
4. On that particular day, a few rooms appeared OK.
5. I noted dirty curtains and lockers, and hazardous broken pipe spigots, stained tiles and leaks around radiators, and lots of stale air.
6. some areas had mouldy smells and others smelled of dust, urine, and even chlorine.
7. When CASLE does talks on IEQ we give equal weight to the importance of ventilation and source control. You can't have only one of the two and expect healthy IAQ and healthy bodies. Halifax West obviously has problems with both so putting in a better ventilation system may help the situation, but won't likely solve it.
8. One attempt at source control was the use of floor model air filters. That can work and I was glad to see them as so many teachers and students I know in other schools have requested and been denied filter machine assistance. Someone here IS trying. However, the filter's manufacturers recommend replacing the filters every two years, but let's be realistic - in my home where we practice source control the filters last more than two years. In a place like Halifax West - well, two out of three of those filters were throwing off their overload. They smelled like a sour combination of chemicals, body odours and smelly feet! Those particular machines are the best on the market, but even they have a limit to the amount of pollution they can absorb.

As I said, today I am breaking from the norm. I want to reflect on the human capacity to accommodate to negative experiences or events in our surroundings and lifestyle. As time goes by we adjust and the raw clarity wears off. I wonder...is that how we manage not to notice the deterioration of so many of our provinces schools? Have we been seeing tired old buildings as being the "norm" and as acceptable?

Then there is the phenomenon of adaptation - physical adaptation - similar to the first puff on a cigarette - at first our body rebels, we cough and suffer, but after a while we are hardly aware that smoke is going into our lungs - the body has adapted. The fact remains, though, that even though we seem to have accommodated to the smoke, it does harm to the body slowly, chemical by chemical, cell by cell, until, for many of us, we reach a diseased state.

I think the challenge for us, those who did the walk through, is to look at that visit with new eyes, without preconceived ideas of what schools are like - was it acceptable or not? Was it like that first puff of cigarette? What did you see and what did you breathe? Was that an acceptable place to send our young people every day? If that were an apartment, would you be rushing out to rent it before someone else snaps it up?

This is my answer:

We send our children there every day. We send our staff there every day, and we expect them to stay there.

They have accommodated to a less than ideal situation, but what of their bodies?

We have prisons in better shape than that.

We are not a poor country

Where have our priorities been to allow a situation like that to develop?

Our most valuable commodities are not fish, or forests or off shore oil, they are our children.

Well, all I can say is. What are our children really worth to us?

I expect you know Indoor Environment Quality is an emerging field. We often see the outcomes but not necessarily see the clear reasons behind those outcomes. This "emerging science" is as complex and non-perfect as is our knowledge of the workings of the human body. But I have come to believe in the importance of what's called the Precautionary Principle, and Due Diligence when it comes to the health of building occupants. There are two kinds of caution: the kind that causes to avoid an action and the other propels toward action. "Until we have definitive proof we won't act" illustrates the first kind. "There is significant evidence that this situation may be the case so we will take precautionary action." illustrates the second. Both would call themselves "cautious".

Local lawyer D. Ring's presentation to HR city council last week is a further comment on this: She said something like, "We can't wait for every scientific "i" to be dotted and every epidemiological t to be crossed before we take action to protect our health from environmental impacts." And, "In fact, some of history's most sound decisions were made on the basis of prudence." In the school system we have a prime example of this: the removal of carpets from Nova Scotia schools. The carpets first came out on blind faith, but soon the improvement on health was undeniable.

Due Diligence is a legal term. In a Peel county, Ontario ruling, the judge said the school boards have to protect children at the same level "as would a prudent parent."

So where are all the prudent parents in this situation? Each trusts everyone else is taking the prudent protective action. With this Action Team I hope we are breaking that circle of buck passing and are taking ownership of our schools - each of us practicing Due Diligence.

Over the years I have seen locker rooms converted into classrooms but without the drains plugged, rotted seaweed that once served as insulation inside buildings' walls, I have seen false walls and ceilings built to cover mouldy walls and ceilings (as if it can't hurt you if you can't see it), curtains so mouldy they were stiff and had to be stood upon to folded into bags and which took up to 8 washings before the original colour was apparent, and much, much more.

\* Many things, cant be found until the walls are taken apart. Harmful things inside walls can migrate and can impact on health.

\* Many things aren't clearly recognized as health impacts until they aren't there any more.

Testing with even today's equipment remains an inexact science. I have become convinced of the wisdom of the human body. The most powerful gauges we have of a building's safety are the bodies of the people who spend their time there. At Halifax West those bodies are screaming at us to listen. And WE are the Action Team and have the opportunity to practice due diligence and prudence. I look forward to what we will do.

Respectfully submitted

Karen Robinson

CASLE

for the Halifax West High School Community members of the Action Team