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PRESS RELEASE

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Baltimore City Public Schools' CEO Announces System-wide Shift to Bottled Drinking Water

BALTIMORE --Baltimore City Public School System CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso announced a system-wide shift to bottled drinking water for students, teachers, staff, and visitors today. The shift is expected to be completed by Friday, November 9. The re-evaluation of the overall policy was prompted by new testing that found several water fountains that had passed previous tests for lead and were permitted to return to use had subsequently failed.

“Parents, students, and teachers prefer the bottled water,” said Dr. Alonso. “Maintenance of the existing water fountains is not worth the expense and concern. It is more cost effective to provide bottled water than to continue to flush, test, and review hundreds of water fountains across the school system each year.”

Recent random testing by the health department found lead levels in water fountains to be much improved from 2003 when all the fountains across the system were shut down. However, despite the school system’s best efforts to maintain the water fountains and to make them fully operational, a small percentage failed to meet the cutoff levels.

The Baltimore City Health Department collected samples of water from working fountains in 10 randomly selected schools, all of which also offered bottled water to students. The laboratory of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene performed the tests.

Of 84 working fountains tested at all 10 schools, 74 had levels of lead below the cutoff level of 20 parts per billion. However, 10 fountains had levels above the cutoff level. The fountains were immediately shut off.

“What concerned us was that the fountains that failed this time around all had previously passed tests, and all had replacement parts,” said Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, Commissioner of Health. “Since our goal is 100 percent confidence, the best approach is to switch to bottled drinking water.”

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“We don’t want water fountains to be a distraction to the teaching and learning taking place in the classroom,” said Dr. Alonso. “We want to make sure our children, teachers, and staff have clean water to drink so we can concentrate on education.”

A financial review showed that the cost of bottled drinking water for the school system is expected to be approximately \$675,000 per year. By comparison, the school system is paying approximately \$350,000 for bottled water in schools without adequate numbers of working fountains, \$275,000 for staff and consultants to oversee the testing program, and \$50,000 for laboratory analysis. In addition, hundreds of custodians spend time flushing each water fountain every day, and many other school system and health department employees are involved in reviewing and approving results.

In the future, exceptions may be granted on a school-by-school basis, such as for schools that have entirely new piping and fixtures.



Summary of Health Department Testing Results

The Health Department conducted testing at all available working fountains at 10 randomly selected schools in October 2007. The testing was performed by the laboratory of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. All 10 schools had at least some bottled water available on site.

- Of 84 drinking fountains tested, the water in 74 fountains (88%) passed the test, with lead levels less than 20 parts per billion.
- In 10 fountains (12%) located in four schools, the water failed the test, with the lead content exceeding 20 parts per billion of lead. Five of these fountains had lead levels exceeding 100 parts per billion, with the highest at 655 parts per billion of lead.
- Fountains that tested high for lead were immediately shut off.
- The four schools with at least one fountain that failed the test already had a total of 54 water coolers with bottled drinking in use. An additional 15 coolers were delivered.

Overall, the results were much improved from several years ago. At these 10 schools, after the system-wide shutdown in 2003, 69 fountains had tested high for lead and had never been turned back on.

It is not immediately clear why the 10 fountains tested high for lead. All 10 fountains had replacement parts. All had previously passed the test, under conditions designed to elicit the highest possible results. Eight of the fountains had failed the lead test at some point in the past, followed by normal tests. Two of the 10 fountains had passed all tests since the 2003 shutdown.

- According to experts consulted by the Health Department, one possibility is that even when fountains have been fixed, there can still be problems upstream, such as in the pipes.

Based on the results, and the high cost of further evaluating and remediating the water fountains of the school system, the Health Department recommended a system-wide switch to bottled drinking water. Exemptions in the future could be considered on a school-by-school basis.

- Schools tested without high lead levels: Hampden Elementary (6 pass), Lombard Middle (16 pass), Gardenville Elementary (3 pass), Canton Middle (6 pass), Cross Country Elementary (7 pass), Patterson High (18 pass).
- Schools tested with at least one fountain with high lead level: Northwood Elementary (3 pass, 41, 87), Douglas High School (5 pass, 280, 655), Baltimore City College (1 pass, 267, 410), Carver High School (9 pass, 31, 47, 75, 142).