



## Parents ask for school products review

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A mercury thermometer broke in a classroom at Hastings elementary last January. The teacher, who was pregnant, swept up the contents and deposited it in the garbage without realizing such incidents must be reported according to school district rules. Students should be removed from the room and a team called in for cleanup.

No one was harmed by exposure to the spill, but three other mercury thermometers were subsequently discovered at the school, even though the district has been recalling them for several years.

"Research has indicated that mercury exposure is particularly problematic for young children and developing fetuses, which is why we're concerned about schools," said Mark Keelan, B.C. Teachers' Federation health and safety officer.

Teachers at Hastings school have since been informed about the proper protocol, but it's incidents like this that highlight the need to ensure safe products are used in schools and proper safety procedures are followed if accidents happen, said Claudia Ferris, a District Parent Advisory Council member who's also a director with the Labour Environmental Alliance Society.

That's why Ferris was pleased the B.C. Confederation of Advisory Councils approved a motion to urge the province and school districts to review all potentially dangerous products used in schools and replace them with environmentally safe alternatives. The provincial group passed the resolution, which was submitted by the Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council, at its annual general meeting May 6 and 7.

"It's [resolutions] like this that reflect something that a lot of parents want," she said.

The review would look at all products used in classrooms, offices, maintenance and cleaning that contain carcinogens, reproductive toxins and endocrine-disrupting ingredients. They would be replaced with non-toxic products.

When safe options are not available, schools will eliminate the use of the product when possible and, when not possible, students, staff and parents will be advised of the proper handling of such products and be provided with the option of either not using or not being put in contact with the product, according to the motion.

The Hastings school incident isn't the only one that's generated concern in recent years.

Ferris noted custodians in Burnaby's school district were using a cleaner that was a possible carcinogen and a definite reproductive toxin.

"It's on carpets so kids were touching it and putting their hands in their mouths," Ferris explained.

The use of the product was discovered through work by the Labour Environmental Alliance Society, which looked at product information normally accessible to custodians and teachers but not to parents and students.

"We've had a number of issues with the Vancouver School District over the years where they've used paints with higher toxic chemicals than we like," Ferris added. "We have always worked within the system, but it comes to the point where if you don't know about it, then you don't have any rights-that's why we passed the safe products resolution."

The B.C. Confederation of Advisory Councils represents 35 of 109 parent advisory councils in Vancouver. This year, Vancouver parent Debbie Desroches Fulton was elected as secretary on the board's executive.