



Toxins talk of high-school student councils

Student leads an initiative to make schools toxin-free

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Aqeela Nanji, 18, is a Grade 12 student at Sentinel secondary, who is working to ensure all schools are toxin free.

She's also a student representative with the Labour Environmental Alliance Society, a group of labour and environmental activists committed to protecting workers' rights to have healthy and safe jobs, and to protecting and restoring the environment.

The society created a toxin-free school initiative that includes a Statement of Principles on Toxins-Free Schools that stakeholders - school trustees, teacher or custodian unions, district parent representatives or groups of students - are invited to endorse.

"In our schools I don't really know of any instances (of toxins being present), but with the mercury spills that have happened recently in other schools I think it's good that we get this passed," said Nanji.

As a precaution, she recently took the statement to her student council, where it was endorsed in April. Nanji also presented it to Rockridge secondary's student council where it was also endorsed. Members of both student councils agreed that toxin-free schools should be a goal for all schools in the province and that students have a right to know what toxins they may be being exposed to, she said.

Next, Nanji plans to approach West Vancouver secondary's student council followed by the board of school trustees.

"It's important to me because it's concerning the health of students and also it's concerning the environment which I also do a lot of volunteer work with," she said. "I find it very concerning that we still have possibly toxic chemicals in our schools."

Nanji hopes other students get involved in these sorts of issues and find a way to fit similar experiences with activism into their curriculums.

"I think that they should get involved with this, it concerns their health," she said.

Nanji said she plans to enter a post-secondary program focused on environmental studies and political science when she graduates.

"We fully support her pursuit of this," said Barbara Jones, principal of Sentinel secondary.

Jones said the district is aware of these issues already and they abide by a number of regulations regarding the use of products in their schools.

"We abide by the school board policies and the (Workers' Compensation Board of B.C.) regulations," she said. "They guide us in what cleaning products and paints and all those kinds of things we use in the schools."

During her years of working in schools, Jones said she has seen many practices changed over the years as a result of new scientific knowledge. For example, mercury thermometers aren't used by students any more; the chemicals used in the science lab have strict guidelines that have to be followed and custodians must be aware of the proper use and effects of each product used, all as a result of provincial government and WorkSafe B.C. guidelines.

"Awareness-building is part of our learning," she said.

Jones said Nanji's work is important as she may point out products that are toxic that they are unaware of based on new research or findings.

"We don't know everything that's toxic in our environment, so I think it's good for her to help us be aware of that," she said.

"We're looking to this generation to help us clean up the environment. We hope that they do take this (on). This will be great if they do and she's a leader and so we want to help her do this," Jones added.

Parents are also getting behind the movement.

The Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council brought a "safe products" resolution before members of the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils' annual general meeting May 4-7 in Burnaby.

At the meeting, parents called for a review of products used in schools to make sure that none of them contain toxic ingredients, said Claudia Ferris, a Vancouver DPAC representative.

"It's an initiative you don't want to just do for one school, you want to do it for all the schools," she said. "The (B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils) is the parent body that the government listens to. We're looking for a co-operative approach to making sure that we don't have toxic chemicals in the schools that the kids are being exposed to."

Members of the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils passed the resolution, urging the provincial government and school districts to review all products used in schools that contain carcinogens, reproductive toxins and endocrine disrupting ingredients, and replace them with non-toxic and environmentally safe products.

They suggest that all chemicals and products used in classroom and office maintenance and cleaning, including playgrounds, be looked at.

Like the resolution presented to the two North Shore student councils, the passed resolution was based on the Labour Environmental Alliance Society's toxin-free schools initiative.

The resolution also urges that where alternative products aren't available, schools eliminate the use of the product, and where impossible, students, staff and parents be educated in proper product handling and be given the option of using the products.

"What we were doing is making sure that we had a lot of support around the province for this approach so it's trying to build support for the approach which seems to be quite successful," said Ferris, who is also a director of the society.

The movement and support around the province comes as good news, but there's lots of work to be done, she said.

"We're hoping it's the beginning of some teamwork around this," said Ferris.