



Get the Lead Out

Back to School Toolkit

Illinois PIRG
Education Fund



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Our children need safe drinking water—especially at school where they go to learn and play each day. Unfortunately, lead is contaminating drinking water at schools and pre-schools across the country.

The problem stems from pipes, plumbing, faucets and fixtures that contain lead. The common-sense solution is to “get the lead out” of schools’ water delivery systems.

This “Back to School” toolkit is designed to help parents, teachers and school officials get the facts on lead in drinking water and make the case for strong local action to ensure safe drinking water at school:

- Learn the facts about lead in schools’ drinking water with our **factsheet**.
- Raise awareness in your community by sharing a short **video** on social media, and submitting a **letter to the editor** to your local paper.
- Show support for taking action by circulating a **petition**.
- Find answers to more detailed questions with our Links to **additional resources**.

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Factsheet on lead in schools' drinking water

The problem

In the wake of the tragedy in Flint, Michigan, we now know the toxic threat of lead in drinking water extends to thousands of communities across the country. In fact, lead is even contaminating drinking water in schools and pre-schools—flowing from fountains and faucets where our kids drink water every day.

Lead is highly toxic, especially for children

A potent neurotoxin, lead affects how our children learn, grow, and behave. According to EPA, "In children, low levels of [lead] exposure have been linked to damage to the central and peripheral nervous system, learning disabilities, shorter stature, impaired hearing, and impaired formation and function of blood cells."¹

There is no safe level of lead.

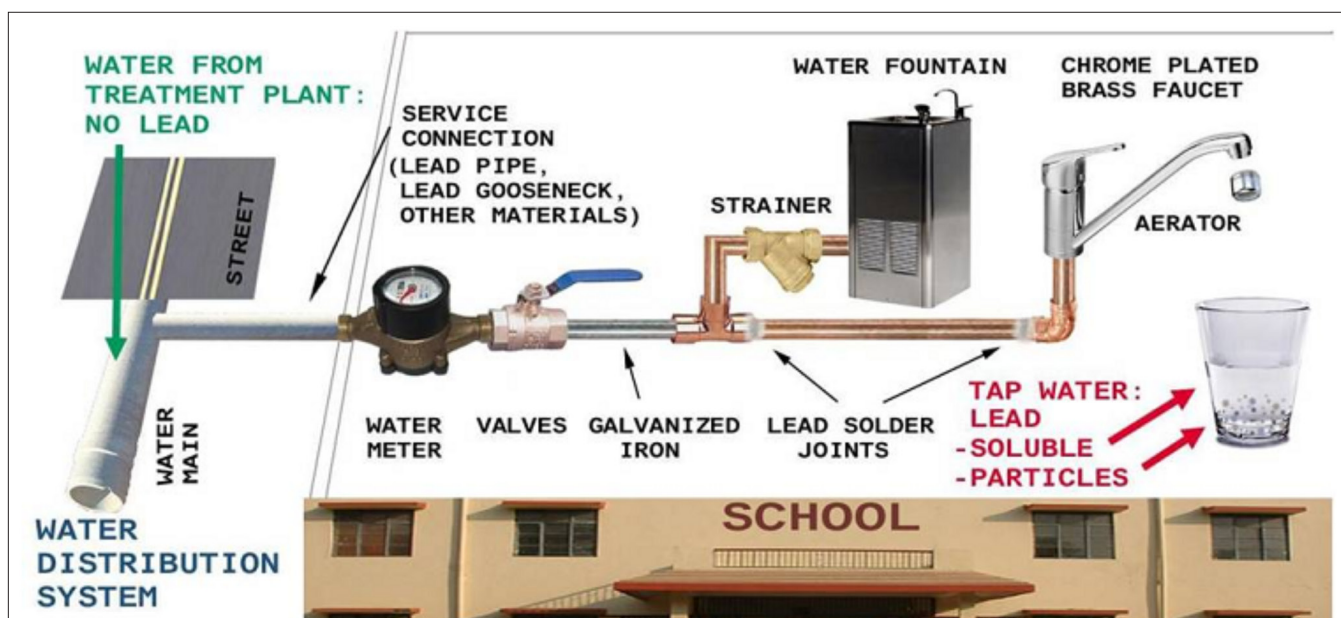
"EPA has set the maximum contaminant level goal for lead in drinking water at **zero** because lead is a toxic metal that can be harmful to human health even at low exposure levels." In fact, medical researchers estimate that **more than 24 million children in America today risk losing IQ points** due to low levels

of lead.² ADHD, anxiety and depression are also linked to exposure of even very low levels of lead.³

Lead is contaminating drinking water at schools.

As more schools test their water for lead, they are finding widespread contamination. Illinois has begun statewide testing of schools, with all results due by the end of 2018. Illinois PIRG Education Fund used recently available data to perform first of its kind analysis of how widespread lead contamination is in school fixtures. In reviewing test results from 155 schools in suburban Cook County, we found lead contamination at 78% of schools at lead levels of 2 ppb or higher. Schools' water is laced with lead in all kinds of communities—including rural towns, major cities, and affluent suburbs.

In all likelihood, the confirmed cases of lead in schools' water are just the tip of the iceberg. Any school built before 2014 is likely to have significant lead in its pipes, plumbing, and/or fixtures. *And where there is lead, there is risk of contamination.*



Lead in drinking water sources. Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Managing Lead In Drinking Water At Schools And Early Childhood Education Facilities* (February 2016), reproduced from Edwards, 2009.

1 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Basic Information about Lead in Drinking Water," EPA.gov, updated December 2016.
2 American Academy of Pediatrics, *Prevention of Childhood Lead Toxicity*, July 2016, page 4.
3 [The Role of Lead Exposure on Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Children: A Systematic Review.](#)

Solutions

Install filters now: Installing filters certified to remove lead is an easy, low-cost step schools can take to begin protecting children immediately. Filters should be installed and maintained on all faucets and fountains used for cooking or drinking in schools.

Get the lead out: Replacing pipes, plumbing, fountains and/or fixtures that contain lead is the most effective, permanent solution to prevent contamination of the water our children drink at school (or elsewhere).

Remove lead service lines: If the pipe connecting your school (or home or child care center) to the water main in the street is made of lead, that *lead service line* is likely to be the largest single source of water contamination. Have it replaced as soon as possible.

Doctor's orders — 1 part per billion (ppb): The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends that schools keep lead concentrations in water no greater than 1 ppb. Taps used for drinking or cooking that test above 1 ppb of lead should be shut off until remediated.



Wikimedia user Sulfur (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Water fountains, filters and bubblers that remove lead are reasonably priced and available today.

Ace the test: Regularly test all outlets used for drinking or cooking, using proper sampling methods that are more likely to detect lead contamination.

Communicate: Plans and actual steps taken to prevent lead contamination, along with all test results, should be made easily accessible (including online) to parents, teachers, and the public. Outlets should clearly indicate when filters are due to be replaced.

Understanding test results and limitations

While it is good news that more and more school districts are testing their water, it is highly likely that lead contamination extends beyond confirmed test results. Here is what you need to know about testing:

Lead corrosion is highly variable. As a result, tests sometimes fail to detect lead—or the full extent of lead—in water, especially when sampling is done improperly.

Share *all* your work with the class. Sometimes officials or the media only report lead levels in water that exceed 15 parts per billion (ppb). But there is no safe level of lead for children. Ask to

see all test results detecting any level of lead in the water.

Cheating on the test? Contamination tends to be higher the longer water sits in contact with lead-bearing pipes or fixtures. So samples taken after flushing of the system, or even regular water use, are unlikely to detect the full extent of lead contamination at school.

Act now to protect children's health. We already know that wherever there is lead in a water delivery system, there is a risk of contamination. *Schools should not wait for test results before taking action to protect our children's health.*

Contact:
Abe Scarr, Director
abe@illinoispirg.org, 312-983-2789

Advocacy tools

Parents and community members concerned about lead in school drinking water should contact the leadership at your school district. Two places to contact would be the school board and the principal's office. Questions to ask:

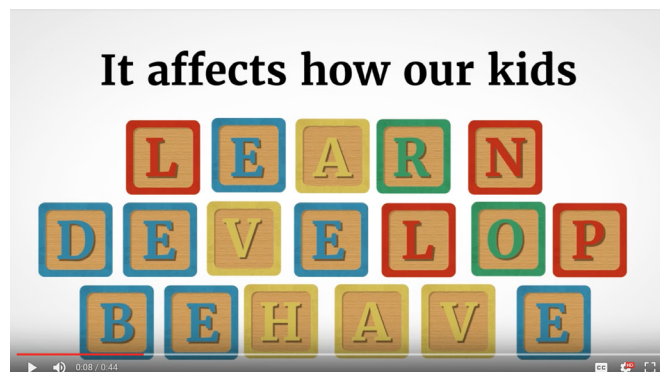
- Do you know what year the pipes and plumbing fixtures were installed. (If they were installed prior to 2014 they likely have some lead components)?
- Have you had the drinking water at the school tested for lead recently? If so, where can I access the results?
- Do you have filters certified to remove lead installed on the school drinking water fountains?
- Even low levels of lead can irreversibly harm children's health. What policies do you have in place to ensure that water at school is not contaminated by lead?

We also recommend that you share our fact sheet with the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and/or other active parent groups and ask them to help you advocate for lead-free drinking water at schools.

Social media tools

Video

To help spread awareness, here is a [short video](https://bit.ly/2n4R4LM) about lead in schools' drinking water that you can share and like on Facebook and other social media: <https://bit.ly/2n4R4LM>



Twitter

And if you are on **Twitter**, here are some sample tweets to help raise visibility online:



As @[yourtown] goes #backtoschool, we know kids run better unleaded. Help #GetTheLeadOut of water at our schools.



Contaminated water @[yourtown] schools? Time for @[LOCAL DECISIONMAKER] to #GettheLeadOut. [INSERT LINK TO YOUR LOCAL PETITION]



There's no safe level of lead. As our children head #backtoschool, get the facts on safe drinking water from @IllinoisPIRG <https://illinoispirg.org/feature/ilp/get-lead-out>



As our kids head #backtoschool, here's a quick homework assignment for parents: watch this video about lead in schools' drinking water. <https://bit.ly/2n4R4LM>

Sample letters to the editor

(TIPS: if possible, write your letter in response to a recent article. Adhere to word limits (if any), provide requested contact information, and call the paper make the case for your letter being printed.)

#1. If your school/district has already tested for lead:

To the Editor:

Thank you for your recent piece on the “back to school” season (INSERT TITLE AND DATE OF RELEVANT NEWS STORY). Here’s one challenge that parents and children should never have to worry about when headed back to school: lead in drinking water.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that impairs how children learn, grow, and behave. Yet from tests done last year, we now know that there is lead in our schools’ drinking water here in [COMMUNITY]. Moreover, because tests often fail to detect lead in water, the threat to our children’s health is likely more pervasive than the results show.

To protect our children’s health, here is a “back to school” homework assignment for [COMMUNITY]: let’s work together to get the lead out. We can start by immediately installing filters certified to remove lead on faucets and fountains in our schools. We’ll also need to replace the lead pipes, solder, and fixtures that cause the contamination in the first place. Meanwhile, let’s shut off taps where lead in water exceeds one part per billion, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Our children deserve safe drinking water at school. Let’s get to work.

Sincerely,

[NAME]

[OTHER REQUIRED INFO]

#2. If your school/district has not tested for lead:

To the Editor:

Thank you for your recent piece on the “back to school” season (INSERT TITLE AND DATE OF RELEVANT NEWS STORY). Here’s one challenge that parents and children should never have to worry about when headed back to school: lead in drinking water.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that impairs how children learn, grow, and behave. In the wake of the tragedy in Flint, Michigan, more schools across the country are testing their water. And all too often, they are finding lead flowing from faucets and fountains where children drink.

Like most communities, [COMMUNITY’s] schools have plumbing and fixtures made with lead. So even without any testing, there is every reason to believe that lead is contaminating water at our schools as well.

So here is a “back to school” homework assignment for [COMMUNITY]: let’s work together to get the lead out. We can start by immediately installing filters certified to remove lead on faucets and fountains in our schools. We’ll also need to replace the lead pipes, solder, and fixtures that cause the contamination in the first place. Meanwhile, let’s shut off taps where lead in water exceeds one part per billion, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Our children deserve safe drinking water at school. Let’s get to work.

Sincerely,

[NAME]

[OTHER REQUIRED INFO]

Links to additional resources

Overview:

Our national [Get the Lead Out](#) report (2017)

Likelihood of lead contamination at your school:

- Until 2014, national standards allowed plumbing, faucets, and fixtures to have a weighted average of 8 percent of surface area in contact with water made of lead. So unless your school has brand new plumbing and fixtures, it is highly likely that its water is in contact with significant amounts of lead before it is used for drinking or cooking.
- [As more schools test, they are finding lead in their water.](#)

Lead in water is harmful, even at low levels:

- American Academy of Pediatrics, [Policy Statement on Prevention of Childhood Lead Toxicity](#) (June 2016) (urging officials to ensure that lead concentrations in schools' drinking water is no greater than 1 part per billion)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), [Basic Information About Lead in Drinking Water](#), including [Is There a Safe Level of Lead in Drinking Water?](#) ("EPA has set the maximum contaminant level goal for lead in drinking water at zero because lead is a toxic metal that can be harmful to human health even at low exposure levels.")
- [EPA Never Said 15 ppb is Safe](#) (quoting EPA official who helped set the 15 ppb standard).

Examples of schools and communities taking action:

- **Illinois:** the state public health agency is now requiring schools to remediate any lead detected in water.
- School districts in **Austin, TX** and **Berkeley, CA** have [adopted](#) a lead standard of no more than 1 part per billion in drinking water.
- **Washington, DC:** has adopted a 5 ppb standard for schools' water, and also requires filters to be installed at every faucet and fountain—in District schools, parks, and child care centers.



Flickr user Jeff B (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Proper testing and limitations:

- Virginia Tech [Instructions to Flint Residents for Proper Water Sampling](#) (no water use for at least 6 hours beforehand, three separate samples from each tap at timed intervals)
- [EPA-Certified Labs to Send Water Samples](#)
- [Avoid Flushing Before Taking Samples](#) (Without flushing, New York City schools found *nine times* as many outlets with high levels of lead so far.)
- [Even a Few Tests Do Not Assure Water is Safe](#) (quoting Dr. Marc Edwards, Virginia Tech)
- Sometimes test results are expressed in terms of ug/dL, which stands for micrograms per deciliter; [1 ug/dL equals 10 ppb](#) (parts per billion).

Finding filters certified to remove lead:

- National Sanitation Foundation <http://www.nsf.org/>
- Water Quality Association - <https://www.wqa.org/>
- CSA - <http://www.csagroup.org/industries/plumbing/drinking-water-requirements/>