# Milwaukee addresses lead contamination crisis in public schools amid calls for transparency and legal action



Milwaukee is confronting escalating tensions amid a lead contamination crisis affecting its public schools, with issues including sudden administrative changes, potential legal action, and growing frustration among parents and the wider community.

The situation came to public attention following the closure of three schools—Fernwood Montessori School, LaFollette School, and Starms Early Childhood Education Center—on 17 March due to dangerous lead levels. Superintendent Brenda Cassellius addressed the school board on Thursday, outlining remediation timelines: Fernwood is expected to reopen imminently, Starms’ lead abatement is projected to conclude by the end of April, but LaFollette’s remediation might extend up to five more weeks.

Parental scepticism remains, with Casey, a parent, expressing doubts about the district’s transparency and commitment during an April 10 virtual town hall, stating to NBC affiliate WTMJ-TV, “I think the district has a ways to go with transparency and earning back our trust with some commitments.” In response to community concerns, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) is enhancing communication strategies. Cassellius confirmed the development and dissemination of a frequently asked questions list to families, alongside ongoing updates about remedial progress posted online and shared directly with parents.

Compounding the crisis is a federal workforce reduction at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that came into effect on 1 April. According to CNN, this has temporarily disrupted the CDC’s lead poisoning prevention and surveillance programme, crucial to state-level interventions. The Wisconsin Department of Health’s request for an Epidemic Intelligence Service officer via the CDC’s EpiAid programme was denied due to these federal layoffs. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. alluded on 3 April to reinstating some cut programmes, including this one. Meanwhile, Caroline Reinwald, a spokesperson for Milwaukee’s health department, emphasised the city's commitment to “moving this work forward and finding solutions locally.”

In a related administrative development, Sean Kane, previously senior director of facilities and maintenance at MPS, was removed from his position amid criticism over expired professional licensing and noncompliance with lead-safe remediation protocols. Dr Michael Totoraitis, Milwaukee’s commissioner of health, acknowledged the decision, stating, “I never want to see anybody lose their job or their role. However, I do think at this moment, it was warranted to help move us into this next step.” Community advocates had highlighted a 19 March Wisconsin Department of Health Services order citing department noncompliance that posed “an unreasonable risk to the health and safety of the children and staff attending MPS schools.” At least seven schools have been impacted, with four students confirmed to have lead poisoning.

Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson publicly acknowledged the challenges, affirming that the city “recognize[s] that there are issues, and we are actively working to address those issues, with keeping the health and, again, the well-being of kids at the forefront.”

The discovery of lead poisoning within Milwaukee’s schools originated in November following a child’s elevated blood lead level diagnosis. After excluding the child’s home environment as the contamination source, health officials found hazardous lead dust around window sills and floors of the child’s elementary school, with lead paint in a basement bathroom identified as the likely cause. Examination revealed that 100 out of 150 school buildings were constructed before 1978, when lead-based paint was still legally applied. The city’s failure to maintain these ageing structures has been cited as a contributing factor.

In light of these findings, MPS is deliberating legal action against lead paint manufacturers, a matter discussed in closed session on Thursday evening. School board member Missy Zombor expressed her support for this approach to Fox 6 Milwaukee, noting, “As we seek resources to help with remediation efforts, we can’t leave any rock unturned... It’s incredibly unfair for taxpayers and school districts to have to foot the bill, when the lead paint industry knew that the lead paint was toxic at the time it was being promoted.”

Milwaukee’s lead crisis is not isolated. Similar challenges have arisen in other US school districts, including California’s Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), which faced criticism last summer for delaying the release of lead testing data until August, despite carrying out tests months earlier. Elevated lead levels were found in multiple school water fountains, with concentrations reaching 51 parts per billion—ten times higher than district limits. OUSD admitted in a letter to families, “Despite our attention to detail and care for our sites, we did not communicate effectively to the members of each school community as the testing launched, as we received the results, and as fixes were being implemented.” Stuart Loebl, a 6th grade teacher at Frick United Academy of Language, highlighted the ongoing health implications, stating, “Students have been drinking lead water this whole time – obviously before the report was released but since as well, which is infuriating. We need a very comprehensive plan for testing going forward that does not just spot test.”

As Milwaukee continues its remediation efforts amid administrative, legal, and community pressures, the focus remains on restoring safe learning environments for students and transparent communication with affected families.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/milwaukee-schools-lead-poisoning-cdc-denies-help/> - Details the CDC's denial of assistance for Milwaukee's lead contamination due to layoffs under HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., corroborating federal workforce reductions impacting state-level interventions.
* <https://www.wuwm.com/education/2025-04-15/layoffs-force-cdc-to-reject-milwaukees-plea-to-help-clean-up-lead-paint-in-schools> - Confirms closure of three schools (Fernwood Montessori, Starms Early Childhood Center, LaFollette School) and Milwaukee's loss of CDC lead poisoning expertise following layoffs.
* <https://www.eenews.net/articles/milwaukee-faces-lead-crisis-without-cdc-experts-rfk-jr-fired/> - Substantiates the scale of Milwaukee's lead crisis affecting seven schools, including three closures, and mentions layoffs eliminating CDC's lead expertise.
* <https://mps.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/en/District/About-MPS/Departments/Office-of-Operations/Facilities--Maintenance-Services/MPS-Lead-Report-.htm> - MPS official documentation of lead remediation efforts, including filtration system upgrades, aligning with claims of ongoing corrective measures.
* <https://wtmj.com/news/2025/04/14/milwaukee-scrambles-after-cdc-pulls-out-of-school-lead-cleanup-efforts/> - Describes Milwaukee's lead cleanup strategies and timelines for affected schools, supporting remediation progress claims and parental skepticism about transparency.