

EDUCATION: Portables closing

Board takes mould issue seriously

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STAFF WRITER

Principals at public schools across York Region will be doing everything they can to get students out of portable classrooms next week.

The decision comes at a time when a number of northern schools have had their portables shut down due to water damage and suspicion of mould lurking in the walls.

"We're looking at accelerating the closing down of portables," said board chairperson Bill Crothers Friday. "On Monday, principals will be asked to look at their school organization and see what they can do to move students into the main building."

In many cases, the portables may not be harmful or contain mould, but Crothers said the board has decided it's time to err on the side of caution.

"The board is taking very seriously parental concerns expressed around portable use and the conditions in portables," he said.

Some parents would say it's too late. At Keswick Public School, a group threatened a class action lawsuit against the board late last week, following the shutdown of four portables said to contain toxic mould.

Last fall, the board insisted it had conducted tests that revealed there wasn't a mould problem in portables, but acknowledged there were situations that could be "conducive to mould."

Winter weather conditions appear to have changed that situation and it has some trustees demanding answers.

"Instead of constantly putting out fires, we need to find the problem and get at it," said Whitchurch-Stouffville Trustee Virginia Hackson.

Crothers agreed, but insisted the plant department's approach, which involved ranking portables needing renovations according to the severity of damage, was working.

"The board genuinely felt in the summer — and maybe incorrectly — that the situation was under control and that we were taking a systematic look at the issue," he said.

The board was meeting Friday morning to create a committee to address the portable problem.

There are 686 portables in York Region public schools and at a repair cost of \$8,000 to \$10,000 each, Crothers said the board faces a huge financial burden in addressing the problem.

Some portables may be mothballed or destroyed instead of repaired, he said. To date, about 100 have been repaired or taken out of service.



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