

EDUCATION

Studies don't link mould and ill health

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

Although the York Region public school board is evaluating options to scrap or renovate existing portable classrooms, board chairperson Bill Crothers says that doesn't mean all 686 portables in the system are unsafe.

"The board doesn't believe the portables are unsafe but there is enough parent concern and, at the same time, a need to reduce dependency," Crothers said in an interview last week.

"The board is trying very hard to respond. The reality is you will probably find mould in any house if you look carefully."

Principals were busy this week looking at every available space to move students into school buildings and out of the potentially harmful portables.

In recent weeks, portables at Keswick Public School, Morning Glory (Pefferlaw), Holland Landing, Huron Heights, Stonehaven (Newmarket) and Mount Albert have been closed due to complaints.

Whether the mould causes a specific health problem is difficult to say, according to Dr. Alan Kaplan, chief of family practice at York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill.

"Whether you blame it on mould or lack of circulation, dust or overall air quality, to say it is only the mould is a little difficult," Kaplan said. "When you start blaming attention deficit disorder on mould, you've gone a little far, but attention spans may decrease because a child's nose is stuffed up or they aren't feeling well."

Kaplan said it is critical the board study the problem, but added mould is just one factor that could be contributing to symptoms a child or staff member is suffering.

And officials at the York Region health department said studies by the Ministry of Health are still inconclusive as to whether mould is harmful.

"The information we have is that it has been associated with respiratory problems," said Helen Doyle, manager of the health promotion division.

"And the Ministry of Health says it isn't a health hazard but conditions can cause complications in a portion of the population and can contribute to problems when exposure is high."

Mould has been shown to trigger asthma attacks in 10 to 30 per cent of people with asthma, but Doyle said the amount of mould and how long someone was exposed to it are

also factors to consider in assessing damage done.

Whether the mould is directly to blame or not, sources said the Ministry of Labour is conducting an investigation at the board since the discovery of stachybotrys atra mould at Holland Landing and other schools.

The investigation will determine whether the board violated the Health and Safety Act by failing to take appropriate action.

Of the 686 portables in the public school system, 500 are used on a regular basis by 15,000 of the board's 80,000 students. While about 20 per cent of the portables have already been renovated, at a cost of between \$500,000 and \$750,000, the balance of the board's stock of portables will be repaired in the near future.

With a firm policy to reduce the number of portables in the system, the board hasn't added any new portables in the past five years.

But even with a commitment to get rid of them, Crothers said it is unreasonable to believe portables won't be part of the landscape.

"Philosophically, it would be nice to say we will operate without portables but, feasibly, it is not possible," Crothers said.

Board 'plans for the worst' with Y2K bug

BY PATRICK CASEY
STAFF WRITER

York Region's Catholic school board has established a task force to tackle potential problems created by the Year 2000 millennium computer bug.

The Strategic Millennium Awareness Remediation Team (SMART) will focus on a six-step process to ensure the Y2K bug will have minimal impact at the board.

The internal clocks on most computers operate on a two-digit system and at the stroke of midnight on Jan. 31, 1999, the clocks will read 00 instead of 2000.

System shutdowns of computer programs such as air traffic radar systems, bank machines and hydro outlets are feared during the early hours of the new millennium.

"We take this very seriously because we don't know what's going to happen," separate board finance superintendent Normand Fortin explained. "We have to plan for the worst-case scenario."

Steps will include identifying all hardware, software and equipment that could cause problems, classifying all non-compliant items, testing, repairing or replacing components and developing extensive contingency plans.

"The bug is totally predictable in its timing, but totally unpredictable in its effect," added school board programmer analyst Darlene Clapham. "We need to be pro-active because we are all at risk."

A major target of the millennium bug surrounds embedded systems such as elevators and fire alarms. They are a weak link in the chain because the board must rely on outside agencies to provide proper service.

Luckily, the Christmas holidays continue until Jan. 9, 2000, giving school board officials some flexibility to deal with problems that may arise.



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