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Asbestos removal prompts meeting with parents

87 public schools contain hazardous material

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

With half of York Region's 174 public schools still containing asbestos, board officials hope to calm parents' fears during a meeting at Unionville Public School, where a recent clean up created concerns.

Board representatives, independent consultants and an associate professor of environmental studies from the University of Toronto will take parents' questions Thursday at 7 p.m.

"Like all public organizations that have buildings built before the 1980s, we've got asbestos," board spokesperson Ross Virgo said. "About half our schools were built before the '80s. Like all public facilities, we have put an asbestos management plan in place."

Schools with asbestos are inspected every two to three years and are rated good, fair or poor, Mr. Virgo said.

When it's fair or poor, we seal and remove the material in strict accordance with occupational health and safety guidelines. We follow a stringent protocol, including notification to all concerned," he added.

Following an asbestos clean up at Unionville Public School during the summer break and another last month, Alan Graf, whose son is in Grade 1, mobilized other parents.

"We asked for information in September when they closed a classroom after finding asbestos on top of a filing cabinet," said the Unionville resident.

"This is worrisome and it's becoming a serious issue. Everyone knows prolonged exposure to asbestos is dangerous. My son will be at the school for eight years. I have another child who'll be there for 10."

Mr. Graf and approximately 50 other parents signed a letter Nov. 3 addressed to school principal Steve Gardner. A reply followed, inviting the community to next week's meeting.

Increasing concerns was last month's transfer of more than 300 students and more than 20 staff from Woodland Public School in Thornhill to Richmond Green High School in Richmond Hill after parents opposed an 18-week asbestos clean-up during weekends at the school.

"There's a larger issue here," Mr. Graf said. "How many schools have asbestos and why? It just floors me. I had a summer job 25 years ago removing asbestos from Toronto board schools. Why, after so long is there any asbestos in any school facility when we know it affects kids' and teachers' health?"

Mr. Virgo said the board hopes to ease parents' anxiety.

"We are managing the (asbestos) situation as we do with all older buildings under every prescription of Ontario legislation," he said. "In fact, the board goes above and beyond."

Mr. Graf anticipates next week's meeting to be more informational than confrontational.

"They are starting to sound like tobacco company executives explaining there's no danger in their product," Mr. Graf said. "This whole asbestos issue should have been remedied years ago."

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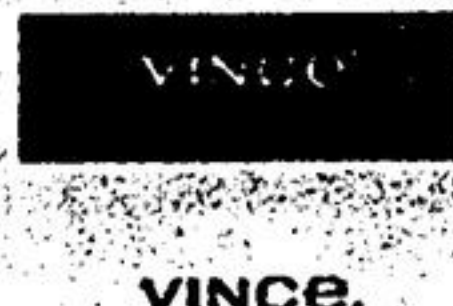
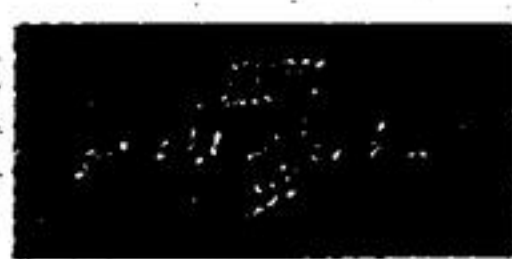
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