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## Lead found at two San Marcos schools, as districts test for toxin



File photo of tap water collection for lead testing.



By **Deborah Sullivan Brennan**

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**W**ater fixtures at two San Marcos schools had unsafe lead levels, according to tests intended to check whether California children are being exposed to the toxic metal at school.

School district officials said this week the fixtures have already been removed. The investigation began early this year, after the State Water Resources Control Board ordered water districts to conduct free lead tests for school districts that request them.

As of April 14, 737 schools throughout the state have asked for lead testing, according to board documents. In San Diego, 305 schools are checking for lead, a poisonous element that can cause brain damage and learning

problems. In a handful of cases the tests have revealed lead hazards in school water systems.

In January, samples from a water fountain at San Marcos Middle School showed lead levels of 29 parts per billion — nearly twice the legal limit. The school immediately removed that fountain, and continued to analyze its other schools, the district reported.

“Because it is critical to San Marcos Unified to ensure that the water used by our students, staff, and community is safe, the district elected to have all sites tested,” the district said in a statement.

Subsequent tests in March showed that a drinking fountain at Twin Oaks High School also had lead levels of 15 parts per billion — the threshold at which the water is deemed unsafe. Another fixture in a wood shop classroom at that campus also showed lead levels of 31 parts per billion.

“Both of these results were due to bad fixtures, not a contaminated water supply, and they have been removed,” the district stated.

Other San Marcos campuses that were tested showed lead levels below 5 parts per billion.

Dozens of other North County schools — including those in Vista, Bonsall, Fallbrook, Carlsbad, Oceanside, Encinitas, Cardiff and [Escondido](#), as well as High Tech charter campuses — have requested testing, but none have reported lead levels exceeding the 15 parts per billion limit.

The federal Safe Drinking Water Act prohibited the use of lead in pipe and plumbing materials after 1986, so schools built after that are less likely to have elevated lead in their water.

When High Tech officials tested new buildings for their North County elementary, middle and high schools, they found no detectable lead.

“Given the age of these facilities, the oldest being built in 2009, this result was expected,” Paul Dooley, director of facilities for the campuses, wrote in an e-mail. “Nonetheless, we are pleased to know for sure.”

In Escondido, where a number of schools were built around the 1950s, negative results weren’t certain. The district, which falls within four water districts, started with its oldest campuses, including Central Elementary, built in 1938. They were relieved to find no cases of elevated lead at those sites, and will continue to test the rest of their schools in coming months, said Michael Taylor, assistant superintendent of business services.

“We wanted to make sure we got our oldest schools taken care of first,” he said.

Last month, San Diego Unified School District also announced that drinking fountains at a campus that houses Co-Operative Charter School 2 and Emerson-Bandini School had [excessive lead levels](#), with one fountain showing lead contamination at more than twice the legal limit.

Students at the site complained that they became nauseous and vomited after drinking water at the school, according to an e-mail about the tests. And a teacher’s therapy dog also refused to drink from one fountain,

which later tested positive for contaminants.

The city is testing water systems at all San Diego Unified properties to identify whether any other campuses have unsafe water sources.

And in January, school officials found elevated lead, copper and bacteria at La Mirada Elementary School in San Ysidro, including one sample that showed lead at 267 parts per billion – nearly 18 times the legal limit for drinking water. Students at that campus and two other schools in the district are drinking bottled water while officials attempt to solve the problem.

Concern about lead in water supplies erupted in recent years after the city of Flint, Michigan, suffered widespread lead contamination from corroding pipes in the city's water system. The city declared a state of emergency in 2015, after child lead poisoning cases in the area doubled.

Lead is a naturally occurring element that was previously used in building materials including paint and piping. Myriad state and federal regulations restrict its use, but lead remaining in plumbing and structures still poses hazards.

Severe lead poisoning can lead to coma, convulsions and death, according to the [World Health Organization](#). Lower levels cause pernicious symptoms, gradually impairing children's brain development and leading to reduced IQ, attention problems and antisocial behavior. Those symptoms are not reversible, the organization warned. Lead can also cause physical damage including anemia, high blood pressure, kidney problems and immune and reproductive disorders.

"There is no known safe blood lead concentration," the organization stated, noting that blood lead levels once considered safe can still lead to behavioral and learning problems.

Leticia Ayala, Healthy Kids Campaign director for the Environmental Health Coalition, based in National City, said she was pleased that local schools are checking lead levels, but said they should continue efforts to reduce lead in their water facilities, even when tests show they are below legal limits.

"It's good to test, because then you know what the levels are, and the goal should be for all school districts to get down to zero," Ayala said.

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