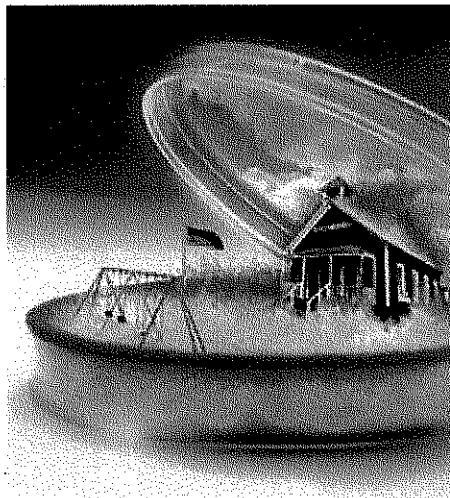


BROWARD SCHOOLS MOLD PROBLEM SPAWN LAWSUITS



By Steve Harrison

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Mold problems spawn lawsuits

Parents say conditions at the schools made their children sick, and they want the district to pay.

When a grand jury blasted the Broward School District this spring for its too-slow, too-sloppy effort to remove mold and mildew from schools, the report warned that the negligence invited costly litigation.

That prediction came true this week. More than 20 lawsuits were filed in Broward Circuit Court Thursday on behalf of employees and parents of children who attended Riverside Elementary in Coral Springs and Indian Trace Elementary in Weston. They are seeking what one attorney called "major monetary damages" against the school district and firms that designed, built and maintained the schools.

For two years, Cara Aliseo's son attended Riverside Elementary, a school with a faulty design and sloppy original construction that the school district struggled to clean up for more than two years.

"He was healthy before they got there," said Aliseo, of Tamarac.



WALTER MICHOT/HERALD STAFF

LEGAL ACTION: Cara Aliseo's son attended Riverside Elementary, where she says the mold made him sick.

"But during the first grade, my son was taking 20 prescriptions. He had two surgeries."

Aliseo said the child suffered from headaches, rashes, vomiting and upper respiratory infections. He since has transferred to a different school.

The thrust of the lawsuits is that the school district knew there was an unhealthy mold and mildew problem but didn't do enough to protect students and employees.

Aliseo and parent Mary Macfie of Weston attended a press conference Friday afternoon announcing the litigation.

Macfie's two children went to Indian Trace.

They are seeking compensation for pain and suffering, loss of time at work and school, and medical expenses. They also want the school district to provide long-term medical monitoring to make sure there will be no recurring medical problems from the mold exposure.

The plaintiffs and attorneys wouldn't discuss how much money they are seeking.

"How can you put a dollar amount on my child's health?" Macfie said.

Regardless of the outcome, it will be costly for the school district to defend the lawsuits. It's unclear whether the legal work will be handled by staff attorney Edward Marko or by an outside firm. Marko did not return telephone calls from The Herald on Friday.

The 22 plaintiffs include 17 students and five employees of the schools, including some teachers.

"These families' lives were turned upside down," said attorney Joseph Osborne, one of two attorneys representing the plaintiffs. "They have seen their children be forced to go to school in an environment that is unacceptable."

Mold and mildew are common in humid South Florida, where they thrive in the moist environment. Poor school designs and faulty construction often allowed rainwater to seep in and soak the dry-

wall, providing a perfect, hidden breeding ground.

Dozens of Broward schools have had mold and mildew problems over the past 15 years, although Riverside and Indian Trace are two of the more high-profile problem schools.

"We expect this will be the first wave [of litigation]," attorney Scott Gelfand said.

The school district contends that the cleanup is complete at Riverside, where workers gutted classrooms to replace mold-infested walls and installed a new roof. The plaintiff's attorneys said Friday that problems still exist there, but school district spokesman Joe Donzelli said the school is safe.

The school district acted aggressively at Indian Trace, closing the cafeteria and more than a dozen classrooms this fall when air-quality tests found unsafe levels of mold and mildew. The district acted far more quickly there — after the grand jury report — than it had with other schools in the past.

The cafeteria may open in early October, Donzelli said, adding that the school system doesn't comment on pending litigation.

But parent Macfie the school district's actions are "too little, too late."

This isn't the first lawsuit against the school district for mold and mildew problems. The School Board is close to settling a 2-year-old action at Virginia Shuman Young Elementary in Fort Lauderdale, but the 22 lawsuits filed Thursday are the first since the grand jury report.

"[The grand jury report] really laid the groundwork in the community for this," School Board Chairwoman Lois Wexler said. "I hate to use the word invitation, but it is the road map for future suits."

Wexler said the School Board is firmly committed to fixing the remaining prob-

lems. Deputy Superintendent Jim Notter, who ran the construction department on an interim basis before Michael Garretson was recently hired, will continue to oversee mold and mildew cleanup.

The school system in June also issued a reply to the grand jury report. It was short on specifics, but said it was complying with the grand jury's recommendations.



WALTER MICHOT/HERALD STAFF

SUING: 'How can you put a dollar amount on my child's health?' asks parent Mary Macfie on Weston.

SMART BOX

THE STORY SO FAR

- In the late 1980s, schools such as Country Isles Elementary in Weston with poor designs and sloppy construction began to leak, and the water allowed mold and mildew to grow in the walls. Parents at Virginia Shuman Young Elementary in Fort Lauderdale complained that mold was making their children sick and that the School Board was ignoring the problem.
- Throughout the '90s, the same thing was reported at dozens more schools. School officials pledged that they were fixing the problem, but the response was slow and often ineffective.
- A Broward State Attorney's Office investigation in January 2002 focused on mold and mildew cleanup. The grand jury report released in May 2003 was highly critical of the school district for its lax attitude, suggesting a state oversight board might be needed.
- Two months later, the district outlined its attack strategy, pledging to keep parents better informed and to fix all roof leaks by the end of this year. Deputy Superintendent Jim Notter will continue to oversee mold and mildew efforts.
- Twenty-two parents and employees at two schools filed lawsuits Thursday against the school district and several firms that designed, built and maintained Indian Trace Elementary in Weston and Riverside Elementary in Coral Springs.