SUPPORT

Senate Bill 371 – Environment – Drinking Water Outlets in School Buildings – Testing for Elevated Level of Lead

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
February 11, 2020

The Lead Poisoning Prevention Commission supports state and local lead poisoning prevention strategies that help to detect and eliminate environmental lead hazards, especially when children are at risk.

The Commission writes in support of SB 371, which seeks to lower the action level for lead in school drinking outlets from 20 parts per billion (ppb) to 5 ppb and requires that periodic testing of drinking water outlets in schools be conducted once every 18 months. The Commission considers this bill to be an important and necessary step towards improving the safety of children in their daily place of learning and socio-developmental growth.

Lead is a toxic substance that can accumulate in the body over time and drinking water alone can compose 20% or more of a person's cumulative exposure. During lunch, after gym class, on bathroom trips, between classes, before practice – our children's consumption of water is routine. We teach children that drinking lots of water is a healthy choice. Yet, their developing bodies and brains are especially susceptible to the harmful impacts of lead exposure.

Lead poisoning impairs the development of the brain and nervous system, leading to learning disabilities, speech development problems, loss of IQ, and attention deficit disorder. Children poisoned by lead are 7 times more likely to drop out of school and 6 times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system. The ultimate tragedy of childhood lead poisoning is that it is an entirely preventable disease.

In 2018, the EPA eliminated the lead in water action level of 20 ppb from their guidelines for schools. The EPA reinforced that 20 ppb was not intended as a health-based standard or threshold and that the only safe level of lead in drinking water is zero ppb (EPA Maximum Contaminant Level Goal for lead in water). Lead in water levels below the misleading threshold of 20 ppb have been left largely unregulated in Maryland schools even though they have demonstrated negative impacts on health. The science is now clear that even low levels of lead exposure have been tied to a range of negative neurological, developmental, and behavioral deficits. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that state and local governments

ensure that water fountains and other drinking water sources in schools do not exceed water lead concentrations of 1 ppb[i]. Maryland must revise its antiquated lead in water standards for schools to reflect the current science and best practices in order to protect the health of its children.

Montgomery County had led the way in Maryland on this issue. In May 2019, the Montgomery County Council voted unanimously to lower the maximum acceptable level of lead in drinking water in schools from 20 ppb to 5 ppb, setting stricter water standards than those of the federal government or the rest of the State. The District of Columbia has also adopted the 5 ppb maximum acceptable level.

The Maryland General Assembly should follow Montgomery County's lead. Students, parents, teachers and school administrators throughout the State of Maryland deserve to know that the regulatory standards set for lead in water in schools is based on the current science. While we know that there is no safe level of lead, we owe it to our children to do more to ensure that the drinking water in their schools is safe. This legislation will modernize standards and ensure that the drinking water in schools is tested periodically so that no child is put at risk unnecessarily.

The Lead Poisoning Prevention Commission strongly supports SB 371. We urge a favorable report on SB 371 by the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee to better protect the health of our children and provide them with the opportunity to thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important piece of public health legislation.

For more information, please contact Pat McLaine, DrPH, MPH, RN, Chair, Lead Poisoning Prevention Commission, at mclaine@umaryland.edu or 443-520-9678.

[i] https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/1/e20161493